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ABSTRACT

These case studies described how seven high-poverty middle schools were able to demonstrate strong academic improvement in a short amount of time so they were performing at levels consistent with, and often better than, higher-income schools in their states. These case studies focus on procedural knowledge that may prove useful to other schools with similar student populations, school sizes, and community types. Site visits were used to collect data from school administrators, teachers, staff, community members, parents, and central office administrators. Respondents who shared their stories enthusiastically described why their schools were successful. None of the respondents: made excuses for not holding all students to high expectations, complained about lack of time or resources, blamed colleagues, disparaged administrators or districts, or used students' family and community situations as an excuse for poor achievement. Staff members took responsibility for student learning and found ways to provide students with the support they needed. Schools and staff members had a collaborative, no-excuse attitude toward identifying and solving problems. (Contains 7 figures and 14 tables.) (SM)

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DRIVEN TO SUCCEED: HIGH-PERFORMING, HIGH-POVERTY, TURNAROUND MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Volume II: Case Studies of High-Performing, High-Poverty, Turnaround Middle Schools

2002

The Charles A. Dana Center
The University of Texas at Austin

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Introduction

The following case studies describe how seven high-poverty middle schools managed to demonstrate strong academic improvement from at least the 1997–98 school year to the 1999–2000 school year. These portraits seek to capture procedural knowledge that will be useful to other schools with similar student populations, school sizes, and community types. These case studies focus on what practices, policies, and belief systems led to improved student performance in these middle school settings.

The cross-case analysis, findings, and recommendations inspired by these case studies can be found in the accompanying report *Volume I: Cross-Case Analysis of High-Poverty, High-Performing, Turnaround Middle Schools.*

Comparing Case Studies

It is important to make comparisons between schools with care. As is true with all schools, each of the seven schools selected faced dramatically different state and local contexts as they embarked on their school improvement process. Some, like Hambrick Middle School and Memorial Junior High School, began their change process from a place in which scores had been far below the state average and morale very low. Others, like Rockcastle County Middle School and Tonasket Middle School, began their improvement process with the fresh start of a new building. Inman Middle School had been engaged in the improvement process for so long that staff could hardly remember a time when scores were not well above district and state averages. Additionally, some of the schools we selected were small and rural while others were large and urban. Finally, because we selected across six different states, the achievement measures and state policy contexts varied significantly.

State Contexts

Schools are influenced by each unique state context. Some of the states represented in this report have had accountability systems in place for up to ten years, and schools have had a significant amount of time to adjust. Others have only recently begun this process. Additionally, some of the assessments that states use represent what the state considers to be a minimum level of knowledge, while other states intentionally set a high bar. For example, in Maryland, where the test has been in place for almost a decade, still fewer than half the students in the state perform on what the state defines as a satisfactory level. This may indicate that Maryland set the bar for satisfactory performance quite high. As a result, it is important to look not only at average scores or the percentage of students passing a particular measure, but also to compare that score to other scores in the state on the same measure. Each case study includes a description of the major policy initiatives in each of the six states included in this study as well as information about each state's assessment system.

A goal of this work is to inspire readers with the stories of each of the seven schools profiled, and that those engaged in the endeavor of school improvement will be able to learn from them. The teachers, parents, students, and administrators participating in this study spoke with pride about their schools, but were also honest about some of the challenges they faced along the way. Although every reader may not relate to everything in each of these stories, the intent is to provide something useful for everyone. Because these schools are at different places in this process, it is recommended that educators focus on schools that may be a step ahead of themselves and use these stories as a way to challenge themselves to reach a higher level of performance.

Hambrick Middle School

Aldine Independent School District

Aldine, Texas

Hambrick Middle School

Aldine, Texas

Hambrick Middle School is in Aldine Independent School District in the northern part of Houston, Texas. Although technically considered a suburb of Houston, the area surrounding Hambrick has many characteristics of an urban area; neighborhoods sit close to buzzing freeways, and small pawnshops and convenience stores dot the streets around the school. Although one neighborhood near Hambrick has relatively newer homes, most around the school contain trailer homes and old wood frame houses, many of which are in disrepair and some of which look to be abandoned. The assistant principal, who spends a great deal of time in the surrounding community talking with parents and finding students who missed school, points out several of the houses that seem abandoned and talks about the Hambrick students who live there. Low-lying areas around the school have recently been under water during a summer flood, and some houses have not yet been fully repaired.

A reading teacher who went to Aldine public schools and then came back there to teach says that the area surrounding the school has changed dramatically over the past several years:

> This was more of a suburban school because this was more of an outlying area at that time. It was a mainly white, middle-class neighborhood. . . . And, of course, our area has changed because as Houston has grown, the inner-city has kind of moved out here, so I call this kind of a suburban inner-city school.

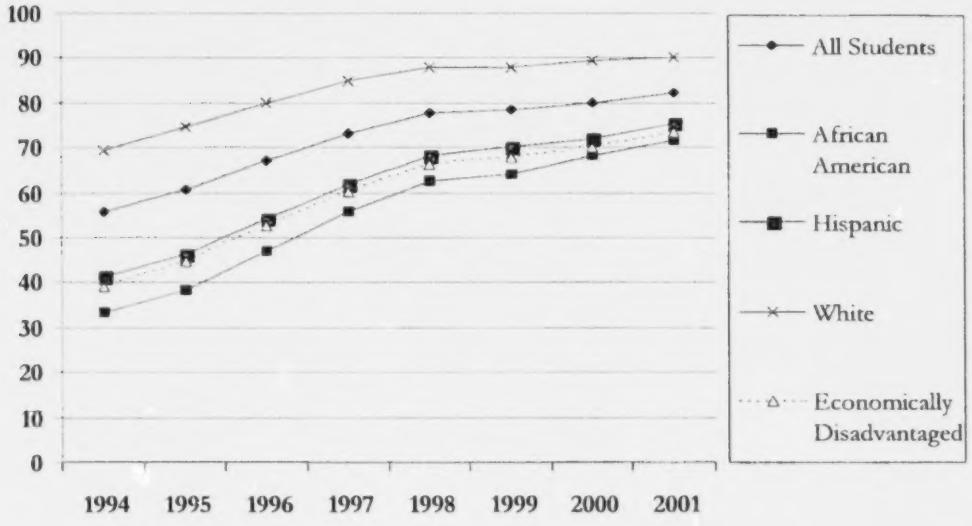
State Context

Texas has a high stakes accountability system in place, and uses the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) to assess the performance of students, schools, and districts. The TAAS has been aligned with the learning standards identified in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills curriculum guidelines. The TAAS has been in place and stable since 1993, and historical data is available on the Texas Education Agency website (www.tea.state.tx.us). Students are assessed in reading and mathematics annually in grades 3 through 8 and are given an exit exam in grade 10. Additionally, a writing examination is given in grades 4, 8, and 10. This exam consists of both a multiple choice and an open-ended portion. Students are required to pass the exit examination before graduating, and schools and districts are given an accountability rating of Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Low Performing based largely on the performance of students on the TAAS exams.[1]

Texas is one of the few states that currently presents student achievement data disaggregated by both race and income level, and the state has seen improvement on the TAAS for all student groups since 1994. Additionally, school and district accountability ratings are dependent not only on overall achievement levels, but also on the achievement of separate groups of students that are based on race and income. Among other things, an Exemplary rating means that at least 90 percent of the students who took the TAAS passed all core subject areas—that is, reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, it means that at least 90 percent of each ethnic group and 90 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged passed each subject area test.

[1] Student drop-out data are also taken into account.

Figure 1: Percentage of All Texas Students Passing All Sections of the TAAS, Grades 3 through 8 and 10



Source: Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System

Texas is set to adopt a more rigorous exam during the 2002–03 school year. This exam will be called the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and will focus more heavily on higher-level skills.

School Demographics

School demographic data illustrate the population shift that has taken place in this area over the past several years. As wealthier families have moved further out of the city, the school increasingly has become populated by students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The percentage of students at Hambrick participating in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program has been steadily increasing at least since the 1993–94 school year, moving from 63 percent that year to 80 percent in the 2000–01 school year.

Table 1: Hambrick Middle School Student Demographics

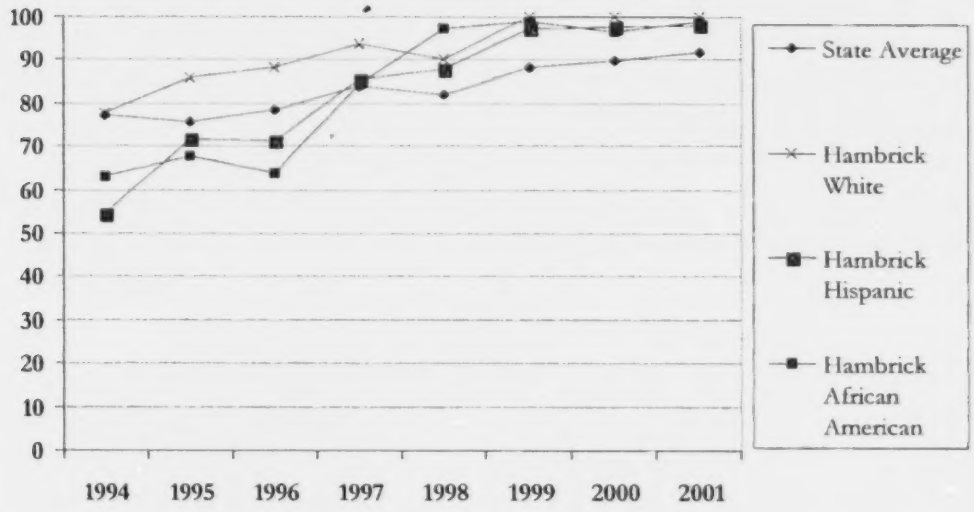
Demographic Factors	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
African American	20%	18%	18%	20%	19%	22%	22%	21%
Hispanic	64%	68%	69%	69%	71%	70%	71%	72%
White	16%	14%	13%	11%	10%	7%	7%	6%
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Participation	63%	65%	70%	73%	78%	84%	82%	80%

Source: Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System

Student Achievement

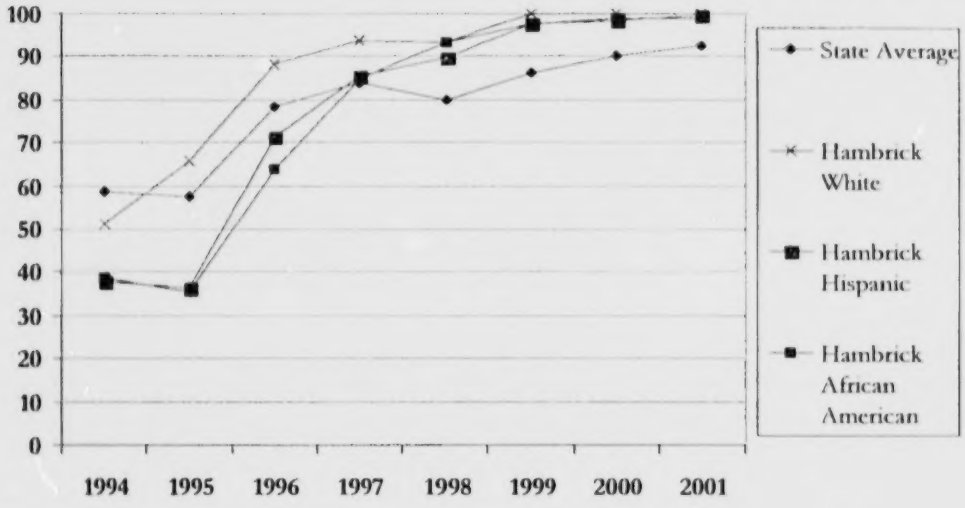
At the same time this demographic shift occurred, the school saw dramatic improvement in student achievement, and was recognized by two educational organizations for its academic success. Just for the Kids, a nonprofit organization dedicated to tracking high-performing schools, rates Hambrick as one of the top-performing low-income middle schools in Texas, and Hambrick has received the Texas Education Agency's highest accountability rating (Exemplary) for the past three years. Not only has the percentage of students passing the reading and mathematics sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) increased dramatically over the past six years, but the school has virtually eliminated the racial performance gap that existed at this school in 1993–94.

Figure 2: Percentage of Hambrick Middle School's Eighth-Grade Students Passing the Reading Portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills



Source: Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System

Figure 3: Percentage of Hambrick Middle School's Eighth-Grade Students Passing the Mathematics Portion of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills



Source: Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System

Additionally, the school tracks student performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) as well as the TAAS because it enables the school to compare the performance of Hambrick students to other students across the nation. Here again, there is evidence of strong gains in student performance in reading, language arts, and mathematics. The data in the table below reflect the same group of students as they progressed through Hambrick Middle School. The table shows average grade equivalency scores from the fall of 1999, when the students came to Hambrick as seventh-graders, through the spring of 2001, when the students were ready to graduate as eighth-graders and move on to high school.

Table 2: Hambrick Middle School Students' Grade-Level Equivalency Scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Subject Area Tested	Grade 7		Grade 8		Growth
	Fall 1999	Spring 2000	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	
Reading	5.5	6.3	6.8	8.2	2.7
Language Arts	6.3	7.4	7.7	9.2	2.9
Mathematics	6.6	8.7	9.6	10.8	4.2

Source: Aldine Independent School District

These data show that students began their work as seventh-graders at Hambrick with below-grade-level skills in reading, language arts, and mathematics, but were above grade level in both language arts and mathematics before moving on to high school, and had nearly caught up in reading. Students experienced almost three years of growth in both language arts and reading and over four years in mathematics during this two-year period.

Portrait of the School

The school serves a total of 1,053 students in grades 7 and 8, and when students leave Hambrick they move on to a ninth-grade school known to the Aldine community as "Little Mac." "Big Mac," or MacArthur High School, serves grades 10 through 12.

Although Hambrick is a large school serving students from several neighborhoods (the school's boundaries cross three different freeways), the school feels smaller. The school's division into three interdisciplinary teams at each grade level helps reduce the feeling of anonymity that is sometimes associated with large middle schools. Each team has a name (The Ferraris, The Aces, and The Dream Team, to name a few) and is located on a different hall so that students interact daily with only a small subset of other students and teachers whom they get to know quite well: "Since we're in teams, the same six teachers see the same kids all day long. So they all know the children; it's like a big family" (Counselor). Hambrick provides a sense of community; teachers, administrators, and students stop one another in the hallways to talk informally, and adults seem to know and take responsibility for all students, giving this school the feel of a close-knit neighborhood in which any adult on the block might stop to greet or, when necessary, scold any child who lives in the area.

Creating a Positive School Climate

Hambrick staff members work hard to establish the kind of environment that is conducive to student learning. For them, this means providing students with a safe and structured environment that enables them to focus on their work. It also means giving teachers the freedom to focus on those things that support students. One of the school's three assistant principals explains, "We expect our teachers to be doing everything they can for their students. We do the same thing to be sure they have the things that they need and that they are afforded the luxury of kids behaving in the classroom" (Assistant Principal-b). To create this kind of environment, the staff focuses on school safety and student discipline, but also on the creation of a warm and inviting environment.

Focusing on a Safe Environment

Students enter the building through metal detectors located directly in front of the main door, and teachers and administrators stand by the door ready to greet students as they come in. Buses are unloaded one at a time so that students do not have to wait in line as they enter the building. Students are encouraged to carry transparent backpacks. Nontransparent backpacks are searched before students can enter the building, and coats are laid onto a table and patted down by a member of the staff. The school has also adopted standardized dress, requiring students to wear khaki pants and shirts with collars. As students walk into the building, those who have not yet tucked in their shirts are reminded to do so by a teacher or administrator. After entering the building, students can go to one of several organized activities including breakfast, morning tutoring, or basketball in the gym. All of these activities are supervised by adults.

Teachers describe how they appreciate feeling safe while at school and explain that safety is an important issue for both students and faculty. One teacher reports,

> Teachers that taught at a different school and then come here, the first thing they see [is that] this is much nicer and much easier than my last school. My last school, it was rough . . . but here it is more structured. And from there, the teacher feels comfortable, and . . . the students begin to feel comfortable and they start to relate to the teacher. . . . They start respecting the classroom and respecting everything around them. (Teacher Focus Group)

Parents and students also discuss the importance of feeling safe at school. One student admits that, although she does not like to have people looking through her backpack, her main complaint about the metal detectors and the searches is she worries they might not catch everything.

Establishing a Peaceful and Inviting Environment

In spite of the security measures described above, the school works hard to establish a warm environment for students and staff. Quiet music plays over the public address system in the mornings. Student work covers the walls along with plaques proclaiming the awards the school received for its academic improvement.

Additionally, a number of procedures are in place to reduce the chaotic feeling that is sometimes associated with large middle schools. Students no longer use lockers (these now serve as places to display student work), and there are no bells to signal class changes. Instead, teachers begin and end class according to their clocks or watches, so at no time is there that middle school phenomenon of a loud bell followed by hundreds of children streaming into the hallways, opening and then slamming lockers. Instead, students exit from one or two classes at a time, talking quietly with one another and with their teachers. Since classrooms are clustered within teams so that all of a student's classes are on the same hallway, students do not have far to walk between classes. They walk on the right side of the hallways to reduce traffic problems, and teachers stand outside their doors and talk to the students as they pass by.

Teachers' interactions with students during this time reflect both their commitment to high behavioral expectations and their desire to establish trusting relationships. Their comments to students during these transition times are a mix of friendly greetings—"Hi, how are you?" "You did a good job on that test!" "Where are you going today after school?"—and reminders and admonitions—"Tuck in your shirt." "Why weren't you at tutoring yesterday?" "Why are you going in this direction? Your science class is that way."

The same kind of environment exists during the after-school dismissal. Five teachers stand in the main hallway, helping see that all students get where they are supposed to go. One teacher stands in the middle of the hall, shaking hands and giving high fives to students as they leave. He takes the opportunity to remind one about his glasses: "Hey, where are your glasses? You need to get them fixed!"

Nancy Blackwell, the school's principal, believes that establishing discipline is critical to middle school improvement. She says that the establishment of "a consistent management plan where everybody buys into it" is especially important for Hambrick's success. A parent describes the consistency of the message staff give students regarding behavioral expectations: "You hear the same thing being said. Not by one teacher or one principal, but everybody is basically giving the same message. And that's been wonderful" (Parent Focus Group). A teacher explains that the consistency with discipline has enabled her to improve the learning environment in her classroom: "If you go in my classroom, you're all right. You don't have to worry about a thing. It's quiet and you can learn" (Teacher Focus Group).

Attending to All Students

Hambrick's staff takes time to attend to the needs of students on an individual basis, and this requires them to have systems in place both to identify students who need help and to provide them with necessary support. One teacher describes the staff attitude that fosters this individual attention: "I think the kids here know that we really care about them. . . . We don't allow kids to fall through the cracks. It's not an attitude of, 'If you don't pass, it's your problem.' It is our problem really. It's both our problems—the kid's problem and our problem" (ESL Teacher).

Teams of Hambrick teachers meet every day during their common planning time to discuss individual student progress. The counseling staff provides teachers and administrators with individualized student test information so that staff members can attend to individual student needs. Hambrick's administrative staff are rarely alone in their offices, but rather they spend their days walking the halls, talking with students, observing classrooms, and trouble-shooting. A coach describes Ms. Blackwell as an administrator who "wears out her shoes," and remembers the staff once having her use a pedometer to find out how many miles she walks per day as she travels up and down the halls of Hambrick. As a result of being out in the building, the principal and the other school administrators exhibit an intimate knowledge of individual students and their needs.

One morning, the principal rushed into the conference room and began digging through a stack of student folders she had been studying. She said one of the students she had talked with at the basketball game the night before was a participant in the school's English as a Second Language (ESL) program and had demonstrated a grasp of English that seemed to exceed his placement in a beginning-level ESL class. Upon examining his test scores and talking with his teachers she discovered that he had in fact scored higher than the other students in the class, and that he was beginning to misbehave. She thought he might be getting bored. Within two days, she had talked with the student's parents and changed his schedule, placing him in higher-level ESL classes and double blocking him in both language arts and mathematics classes so he would attend two periods of language arts and two of mathematics every day. She did not stop with changing his schedule, but called him out of class for a conference in which she explained to him that his classroom behavior had to improve and that he would have to work harder in the new classes. Ms. Blackwell laughs, recalling that at the time she did not realize one of the assistant principals had called him out earlier that day to give him the same lecture.

Thoughtfully Building Schedules

Teachers say that the personal attention given to this student is not an exception, and that schedules are chosen carefully and changed regularly as teachers or administrators notice something is not working well for an individual student. The principal explains that careful scheduling is one of the keys to Hambrick's success: "The scheduling, giving teachers enough time to teach and then making sure the kids are where they need to be is . . . a key element." In scheduling, school personnel think both about students' academic needs and about matching students with the teachers with whom they would be most likely to build positive relationships:

> I'll start off with my seventh-graders in March. . . . I'll watch them as I go in and out of classes, and I'll watch them in the cafeteria, and I'll write down the teachers they're going to have next year. And we try to match kids with the [teacher's] personality. It isn't hard to do. (Principal)

Occasionally, this kind of scheduling leads to some classrooms being imbalanced in terms of numbers, but teachers are willing to take on additional students when they see a need. The principal describes a mathematics teacher who has 31 students in his class: "I'll say I've got this guy, this boy, and he really needs you. And I'll go take him a candy bar and I'll say please, and he'll say okay." In the hall outside this teacher's classroom, belly laughs can be heard coming from his students as he incorporates them into a story problem they are solving.

Teachers also take a strong interest in the scheduling of students, and the school counselor says they are given wide authority to make scheduling decisions. Seventh-grade teachers regularly go into the eighth-grade halls to be sure their former students have been placed appropriately, and then request that misplaced students get reassigned when necessary. Other teachers request changes when

they see that a student is not successful within his or her current schedule. One teacher describes a "real quiet and sweet" student in ESL classes who is making progress in learning English, but who is still not passing her academic tests. She notes that the student is already double blocked in mathematics and is attending a reading and a mathematics lab, but believes that the student would benefit through instruction from a particular teacher. The teacher accesses the student's schedule and offers a replacement schedule. Teachers take responsibility, not just for students while they are in their particular classes, but for their overall academic progress in all classes, and they are empowered to use their intimate knowledge of students to make scheduling decisions that are in students' interests.

Offering Systematic and Comprehensive Tutoring

Teachers also demonstrate significant levels of commitment to students in the amount of time they spend tutoring individuals and small groups before and after school. By 7:30 in the morning, several teachers already have their doors open and are working with students. Additionally, the school runs three late buses a day to take home students who stay after school for tutoring or for an extracurricular activity. Parents maintain that this tutoring is critical to their children's success, and they are especially impressed by the fact that Hambrick teachers are willing to tutor all students, even those who are not in their classes. One parent says, "I have yet to meet a teacher who was not willing to sit down with a child and help them." Another explains that when her child's own teacher tries unsuccessfully to help her with an algebra project, she sends her to a different teacher who is able to explain the concepts in another way so the child understands. Yet another parent says that when her older child, a Hambrick alum, was having trouble in high school chemistry, a Hambrick science teacher had him come for tutoring every day after school for a week.

Individuals at Hambrick tell many stories describing the additional efforts teachers make on behalf of students, and tutoring time is used both to shore up academic skills and to build relationships between students and teachers. An algebra teacher who often has between 12 and 14 students in her room before school says that students sometimes come in to have a preview of the day's lesson. During her afternoon class, students who have previewed the lesson before school serve as peer tutors. The teacher says that not all of the students who come in for morning tutoring are struggling; some just come to have a safe place to be and to do extra work. A seventh-grade teacher has two students helping her decorate the hallway early one morning. She chats informally with them, and even in this setting finds a way to let them know she is watching their progress and expects great things of them, not just with respect to academics. She tells one boy that she saw him playing basketball the night before and chides him for being afraid to shoot.

The tutoring at Hambrick is different from the before- and after-school tutoring that dedicated individual teachers perform on a daily basis in schools across the country in that it is part of a schoolwide strategy to ensure that all students are able to access the academic resources they need to be successful. Teachers from each team are consistently available to students both before and after school, and teachers are paid for the extra time they spend with students. Additionally, teachers discuss individual students' progress during team meetings, and make sure that students who need extra help in a particular subject are attending tutoring on a regular basis. When students are not showing up, teachers enlist the support of parents and administrators to help make sure that students understand they need to be there. Hambrick approaches tutoring very systematically.

Establishing Mentoring Relationships

The school staff mention other ways they work to develop personal relationships with students, and these relationships often center on the high expectations staff have for students. Two of the assistant principals recount stories of having used their relationships with students to help

them deal with difficult issues, particularly with issues of race and poverty. One assistant principal coaches students on a city league soccer team that has made it to the semifinals. He explains that when they began to play teams outside their neighborhood, some of the students were confronted with racism in the form of racial slurs directed at them from the other team. He says he used this as an opportunity to teach the students about things that "are going to happen in life," and tried to teach the students about the importance of maintaining focus even in the face of such comments (he pointed out that his team won the game four to one). Another assistant principal talks with students about similar issues:

> As an African-American female brought up by a single parent, I lived in the projects in Mississippi. So I tell these kids, there's nothing you can't do once you put your mind to it. Never blame your environment or your surroundings because if you want to make things better, it can happen. It can be done. (Assistant Principal-b)

Not only are there several examples of individual teachers demonstrating care for students, but Hambrick also has established a schoolwide student-mentoring program that helps ensure these kinds of positive relationships with adults are available to all students. The school uses the SNAPP (Students Need a Pat and a Push) program to pair struggling students with adults in the school. Through these relationships, teachers not only act as friends and advisors to students, but also push them when students seem to not be working to their potential.

Maintaining Focus

This staff is careful to maintain a focus on the academic needs of students, and school decisions always reflect the goal of improving student achievement. One teacher says,

> Every decision made in this building should be based on students. Not whether or not we have time, not whether it costs money or it might be a little bit of work [for] administrators. Every decision we make in this building should be based on the child.

Staff members at Hambrick make decisions thoughtfully and carefully. They have an intimate knowledge of student achievement data, and use it to make informed decisions regarding how to improve the academic performance of students.

Using Data to Inform Decisions

Hambrick staff members, teachers, and administrators are always ready to show evidence of student performance gains, and they clearly spend a lot of time examining student data. Teachers examine data from the prior school year's standardized testing and use it to make instructional changes for the next year. Importantly, those students who do not participate in the state's accountability testing because of their status as recent immigrant English Language Learners are not left out of this system. These students are given prior-year versions of the same test that other students take, and their data is examined just as carefully with the goal of having all students at grade level before they leave middle school.

Schoolwide, students take check tests every six weeks to see how they are progressing. These tests are aligned with the state-administered TAAS, and teachers and administrators carefully examine the resulting data. On the principal's copy of the results from the last check test, students who are not progressing have been highlighted, and she also identifies classrooms of students who are having trouble on particular objectives and classrooms that have been especially successful on certain objectives. On the back of the datasheets are handwritten notes regarding patterns she noticed and wanted to share with teachers. Several teachers also provide examples of how this

information is used to identify students who are in need of additional attention in a particular subject or to identify objectives that need to be covered in more depth across the department.

Examinations of student achievement test data are not the only way data is used in this school. Staff examine student discipline referral data to understand when and why problems occur. They discovered that most of the fights that used to break out on a regular basis occurred in the cafeteria after lunch. This understanding enabled them to alter their lunchroom procedures by having teachers walk students to and from the cafeteria. They also discovered that too many students were missing out on instructional time because of time spent in In-School Suspension (ISS), to the point that the school was filling almost three classrooms per day of ISS. When they examined referral data they discovered that the vast majority of students were there because of not having the appropriate supplies in class. This helped them rethink how they handle incidences of students not having supplies and dramatically reduce their ISS rate. Now staff keep additional supplies on hand and this is no longer an offence that requires ISS. A mathematics teacher explains how nice it is "just to be able to send a kid down to the office and say 'I need pencils,' and they're here immediately."

Teachers also discovered that the systematic use of data is an effective way to convince administration of policy changes. One of the school's coaching staff reviewed after-school practice attendance data to prove that students who have physical education last period are much more likely to attend after-school practice. He put together the numbers to show the principal and was able to convince her to alter student schedules so that more members of athletic teams would have physical education last period.

Making Academics a Top Priority

Hambrick maintains a strong focus on academics, and in conversations with staff it is always evident that academics are their top priority. In this context, extracurricular activities are still important, but they are used as supports to academics. When the principal first arrived at Hambrick, she did not initially see the importance of extracurricular activities. But, she says, "It took me about two days to realize that if you took away [extracurriculars], you would have nothing. That's your leverage, that's your motivational piece." Because Texas has a "no pass, no play" rule, the school is able to use extracurricular activities as a way to motivate students to focus on academics. Students who participate in these activities keep daily tracking documents that help extracurricular teachers stay on top of students' academic progress. These documents are signed by classroom teachers and display running grade averages as well as checks on homework completion. Additionally, teachers of extracurricular activities are encouraged to incorporate academics into their instruction. The band director, for example, mentions using new vocabulary with students during his classes.

The administrative team is also focused on academics, and two of the assistant principals take on teaching loads in the spring semester. One of these individuals focuses on reading and the other on mathematics. Struggling students are recommended by their teachers for participation in these additional classes. Although this means an extra block of reading or mathematics for these students, the principal explains that students have begged to participate. Additionally, she believes that using administrative staff in this way sends a message to teachers about the importance of teaching and learning.

A major component of this focus on academics is the idea that academic success with high-level material is a goal for each and every student. An ESL teacher states that she significantly raised her expectations for her students, and she now uses the same mathematics content materials as the rest of the mathematics department: "We can't use the regular ESL materials that are put out by the state because they're just too easy. You can finish them so quickly. . . . They just don't have enough meat in them." This commitment to getting more students interacting with high-level material is also

evident in the school's efforts to provide training for all teachers in gifted education, and with making sure that higher-level classes are becoming more demographically representative of the school population. The principal complains that seven years ago, the students in the advanced algebra classes "were all white . . . and the teachers that were teaching the classes were all white." She believes that having all teachers trained in gifted education helps teachers begin to see the potential in all students, and this helps the school focus on including more students in higher-level classes. According to the district's coordinator for gifted and talented education, during the 1995–96 school year Hambrick served only 2.1 percent of its students in the gifted program, and that number grew to 7 percent by the 2000–01 school year. Of these identified students, 69 percent were Hispanic, 17 percent were African American, and 14 percent were white. Sixty-four percent participated in the federally funded free or reduced-price lunch program.

Hambrick's staff's willingness to care for and nurture individual students, in conjunction with their never-failing expectation that students can and must become academically successful produces an environment in which students excel. Parents express appreciation for the fact that their children attend a safe school where they are able to find help when they need it and where they can expect to be treated fairly. Students, in spite of some grumbling about the standardized dress, describe the supportive relationships they have developed with the adults who work at their school, and compare Hambrick quite favorably to other schools they have attended or have heard about from friends. One student explains that teachers care about whether students are successful: "Some teachers [at other schools] may be like, 'If they don't want to do the work, then it's not my problem.' But here, if we don't do the work, they still push us" (Student Focus Group).

Story of Change

Hambrick Middle School has not always looked like the school it is today. In addition to low test scores, teachers and administrators who have a long history with the school recall stories of severe discipline problems. The district had a reputation for gang activity and for a serious dropout problem. Additionally, a teacher notes that the number of fights he broke up on a daily basis was beginning to make him question how long he wanted to remain in the profession. The principal describes the school at that time as "a holding tank" for students between elementary school and high school, and several teachers report that the school lacked focus. Teachers say that, although they had a common block of planning time even then, they worked in isolation. Many say that they did not feel a sense of common purpose. Additionally, many reported that they felt as though they lacked an effective support system.

In addition, the school building had been allowed to fall into disrepair. The principal remembers:

> I mean, everything from desks that were total graffiti, walls [not] being painted, light fixtures hanging from wire up in the boys' bathroom. It was just . . . deplorable. So all of those things you had to kind of attack right off because what we try to produce here is a place where they can come and feel safe.

Although many of the teachers who are now leaders at Hambrick had been there before the school's dramatic turnaround, they had been unable to achieve this level of success. One teacher, who has been at Hambrick for several years, explained that even the most talented teachers working in a context that is not supportive of improvement cannot be successful. With respect to the band, he says, "It doesn't matter who taught here. It could have been Mozart. It doesn't matter."

Leading with Purpose

Virtually all of the staff credits Nancy Blackwell's arrival with having changed the atmosphere in this school into one in which everyone is focused on success, and the importance of her arrival on the campus probably cannot be overstated. She came to Hambrick from one of the district's elementary schools and is credited with having brought about similar improvements in that school. Teachers at Hambrick speak of her with great respect. In answering an open-ended survey item, for example, one teacher says, "[Ms. Blackwell] is respected by everyone because she knows nearly every schedule of all 800-plus students, personally reads all weekly lesson plans, and 'goes to bat' for her teachers whenever she is needed." Another teacher points out that because of Ms. Blackwell's arrival, the school has established

> a friendlier atmosphere [in which there is] positive reinforcement for the teachers and for the children, not a whole lot of negative, which we did have before. It just makes it an easier place to work, with somebody who knows what's going on. (Mathematics Teacher)

In describing the instant impact this principal had on the campus, one teacher says that it is like night and day. Immediately upon arriving at Hambrick, Ms. Blackwell made some structural changes that enabled her, the staff, and the students to experience early success. These changes included some immediate improvements to the school facilities, a concerted effort to provide teachers with adequate supplies and materials, providing additional time and resources for the academic areas most in need of improvement, and making some organizational changes that improved student discipline.

Implementing Immediate Change

Many changes did not require buy-in from the whole staff, but were things that could be done quickly at the administrative level. Although these changes may not be the most important that have taken place at this campus over the past several years, they are the ones that the staff tend to focus on when describing change, and without them, it is unlikely the staff would have been able to focus on the longer-term changes that occurred later. In the short term, the campus focused on improving the overall climate of the school for students and staff and on increasing instructional time for core subject areas.

Attending to Facilities

One of the first things the principal did upon coming to Hambrick was to clean up the building, replacing the chairs in the auditorium, fixing broken light fixtures, and having the lockers painted. She notes that having the lockers painted also gave her the excuse to take them away from students for a year, so it was to her a happy coincidence that they needed renovation. One teacher explained that

> those small things added up to huge differences so that kids started to see that it was important to [Ms. Blackwell] and it was important to us where they studied. . . . It was clean and well kept [and that] made them proud of where they came to school. (Band Director)

The look and feel of Hambrick Middle School is impressive: floors literally gleam and there is evidence of school pride in the displays of student work that cover the school walls, which gives this building an almost elementary school feel.

Using Resources More Effectively

In addition to making sure that the building was clean and in good repair, the principal began working on making sure that teachers had the supplies they needed. Teachers say that before her arrival, even basic supplies had been very difficult to get. One teacher explains that this created a negative climate among staff members. He recalls having to stand in line at the end of the year to turn in his stapler and feeling as though his salary might be docked if he had lost anything. Ms. Blackwell began asking teachers what they needed in order to be successful, and this was not a question that teachers had heard principals ask them before.

During the summer before Ms. Blackwell began her first year as principal, Hambrick's mathematics department attended staff development, and Ms. Blackwell explains the importance of making sure that teachers get supplies they need to implement the strategies they are learning through staff development:

> The first year we started meeting with the math teachers in the summer through the Eisenhower mathematics grant, and Dr. Williams from the University of Houston, she really helped us revamp our whole math program. . . . They put in three weeks of training in the summer. One day each week I'd bring in catalogues, all these math catalogues, just math, and I'd say, "Order what you need."

Ms. Blackwell and Dr. Williams made sure the supplies arrived before the school year began, and eventually teachers began to understand they were going to be able to get things they needed. Although teachers seemed surprised and grateful that this principal has been able to provide them with these items, the things that teachers asked for were far from expensive. Two teachers talked about the fact that they were finally able to get colored pencils for all of their students, and a mathematics teacher was able to get white boards. In spite of the fact that these are small items, they seem to have had a large impact on how teachers felt about their work.

Teachers do not understand how they were suddenly able to get the things they needed. Ms. Blackwell explains that in prior years, Title I money had not been allocated effectively. During those years, all Title I money had been turned over to two teachers who had "stockpiled" supplies, buying computers and spending inordinate amounts of money on incentive rewards for students, so none of this money made it out into the rest of the campus. These resources were reallocated so that some of this money went toward hiring additional staff, some toward purchasing instructional resources, and some, in conjunction with compensatory education funds, went to paying teachers for before- and after-school tutoring.

Restructuring Schools

Resources are also channeled to those subject areas that are in most need. Students are no longer allowed to take two elective classes unless they have demonstrated academic success, and additional mathematics teachers have been hired with the funds that had gone to support providing two elective periods for all students. The principal explains that because of this change,

> . . . the classes [became] smaller, [and] we went to a modified block and so they went from having forty-five minutes of math a day, if they were lucky, by the time you got discipline under control and attendance taken, to . . . ninety-four [minutes a day] and now ninety-seven minutes a day.

The campus also instituted a number of other organizational changes that helped with student discipline. In prior years, teachers complained that they had begun to fear for their safety, and getting control of student discipline was critical to Hambrick's success. Getting rid of bells and

lockers had a positive impact on school climate right away, because this change eliminated some of the problems that took place between classes. Because students did not have to stop at a locker, and because their classes were all on the same hall, the time spent moving between classes was reduced to three minutes, and during this time teachers stood in the hall and talked with students. Teachers and administrators also began standing out in the hallways in the mornings to say hello to students as they entered the building. Although this sounds simple, teachers observe that students were so unused to being greeted in this way that they had to be taught how to reply when a teacher or administrator said good morning, and this had a dramatic impact in that it "woke kids up and made them ready for a positive day" (Teacher Focus Group). These changes have also been important to teachers because they are now freer to focus on those instructional changes that can improve the academic performance of students; energy that went to controlling student discipline problems and finding adequate supplies and materials can now be focused on school improvement.

Implementing Long Term Change

Once some of the immediate needs of the campus were met, the staff began to focus more intently on some longer-term issues that would be more difficult to address. These included establishing ambitious, schoolwide goals that all staff would support, and giving teachers the authority they need to make appropriate instructional decisions for students.

Establishing Consistency

Members of this staff had been used to operating very independently of one another. Additionally, there was not a belief system in place that expected students to be academically successful. Although the teachers who were on campus before Ms. Blackwell's arrival express appreciation and respect for her, there had been some resistance to change in the early years. Ms. Blackwell estimates that 24 teachers left during the summer before she was to become principal (there are 75 teachers on staff)—many because of the reputation she established as an elementary school principal. Additionally, at the first staff meeting, she told the group that any teachers who did not believe that at least 70 percent of Hambrick's students could pass the TAAS ought to leave and that she would be willing to help facilitate transfers. Even though current Hambrick teachers would be incredulous at the idea that only 70 percent of students could pass, at the time this was seen as a very high bar. Although one staff member reports that some of the individuals who left that first year were good teachers, most teachers feel that it was probably a good thing for people who did not agree with the changes to go somewhere else.

This principal continues to hold high expectations for staff. She is frequently in teachers' classrooms and knows what is being taught and how it is being taught. She explains that she needs to see what is going on in classrooms so that she can find out what teacher needs are. Early on, when she identified struggling teachers—particularly new teachers—she established staff development plans and brought in master teachers to model lessons and work with them. However, if it became evident that teachers were not going to be able to meet expectations with additional support, she was willing to ask them to leave. She went to teachers' classrooms not only to see who needed support, but also to learn about effective teaching methods from some of the strong teachers who were already on campus. One such teacher explains that her students even set up a chair in the back of the room so that the principal would have a place to sit.

Empowering Teachers

Although a number of teachers did leave when Ms. Blackwell first came to the school, those who stayed respect her greatly, and this was partially related to her level of respect for her teachers.

One teacher reported that when he met the new principal for the first time, she had already read through his personnel records and prior evaluations and knew that he was someone who took his job seriously. He felt honored that she had taken time to learn about him and his strengths. Interestingly, with respect to some of the changes that this principal wanted to implement, she seemed almost autocratic. One staff member remembers, "When she came in, she had her mind set how she wanted the school to flow. Either you're going to get on the bandwagon or you can find somewhere else to go." However, several teachers explain that with respect to instructional decisions, they began to experience more freedom than they had under prior administrators. One teacher notes, "She's not at all intrusive as far as how you're teaching as long as you're getting the job done. . . . Everybody's different in some way. And that's fine with her as long as you're producing" (ESL Teacher). This flexibility with decision making was not limited to what happened within the walls of a teacher's classroom, but extended to schoolwide instructional decisions. Teachers had increased input into students' schedules and also had more access to how budget decisions were made.

Because the administration focused on taking care of those things that had previously prevented teachers from being able to do their best work, the staff began to focus on the challenging task of improving classroom instruction and raising expectations so that everyone expected all students to be able to perform at high levels.

Moving Forward

Hambrick Middle School is now a place where students are enthusiastic about learning and about their life opportunities. One science teacher notes that the students at Hambrick are like students anywhere, but now they see what they can do:

> Our students seem to me like I would assume they are at any other school. They're not like perfect little kids or little angels or anything. Sometimes they want to work and sometimes they don't. For whatever reason, by the end of the year, they want to; they're excited about reaching their goal.

And teachers understand that their role is not merely to improve student performance at the middle school level, but to use education as a tool for helping students be successful in later life. The band director explains that he wants to change students' perceptions about their world so that they understand that "it is about this big other world out there. And band and math and English are just my vehicle to get there. And if I'm smart enough and good enough to do those things, then I can do anything anybody else can."

Inman Middle School

Atlanta Public School Systems

Atlanta, Georgia

Inman Middle School

Atlanta, Georgia

Just a couple of miles from buzzing interstates and skyscrapers sits something unexpected: a successful downtown urban middle school. Inman Middle School is in the middle of Atlanta's urban sprawl and urban resources. It is within minutes of numerous universities, city parks, medical facilities, cultural venues, and Atlanta's business district. The school is located on Virginia Avenue just north of the affluent Virginia Highlands area. Immediately surrounding it are older homes attracting young buyers with plans of renovation. A few blocks to the northeast of the school, 1920s Tudor-style, two-story homes rest on expansive lots with nicely landscaped yards maintained by gardening crews. No cars clutter the driveways but instead are hidden from sight. Huge trees mark the age and establishment of the community.

To the southwest of the school, the area becomes more urban, with commercial and residential property standing side by side. Public bus stops with people waiting dot the streets. The residential properties are rentals. Neon signs advertise pawnshops and lotto tickets. Mixed in this area are tall government apartment complexes. A sign in front of one of the large buildings indicates it is the Salvation Army homeless shelter, one of five shelters that send students to Inman Middle School. Moving further south, the housing becomes more dilapidated and marked by poverty, with bars covering broken windows and run-down furniture sitting on the curbs. Coin laundries and drug detox centers are interspersed with housing. Students from all of these areas attend Inman Middle School.

State Context

In 1986, the Georgia Legislature passed and implemented the Quality Basic Education Act. This act led to the establishment of a uniform and sequenced curriculum, the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC). The QCC represents the learning standards for students in Georgia. It is reviewed every four years. Following a major revision from the 1995 review, Georgia law required the development of a criterion-referenced test to measure how well students were meeting the standards established in the QCC. In 2000, an amendment to state law required that all students in grades 1 through 8 take the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) in the content areas of reading, language arts, and mathematics. Furthermore, students in grades 3 through 8 will be assessed in science and social studies. The CRCT used multiple test-item formats, including selected response (multiple choice) and constructed response. Because this is a new test, first administered during the 1998–99 school year, trend data is not available. Additionally, data is not reported disaggregated by ethnicity or income. More general data including school report cards can be found at *accountability.doe.k12.ga.us/Report01*.

School Demographics

Inman Middle School has undergone a demographic shift over the past decade, much of which is not revealed in school demographic data. Some of this shift is the result of city actions, some the result of location, and some the result of Inman taking advantage of its situation. However, what is significant about the shift is that while the school has adjusted to changing demographics, student performance has remained strong and has even improved.

Around 1995, the city of Atlanta closed the oldest government housing project in the nation and relocated people into mixed-income areas. Although some teachers mention that the closing of

the housing project has eliminated some of the concentrated poverty visible at the school before, the school still serves a population in which well over half the students are eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. Recently, because the Inman school boundary includes a wealthy neighborhood to its east, the school has begun a marketing campaign to attract neighborhood students who historically chose private schools. This effort has been successful because of the school's already strong student performance. For the 2000–01 school year, the school's percentage of students participating in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program declined, although it was still almost 60 percent.

Table 3: Inman Middle School Student Demographics

Demographic Factors	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Enrollment	773	773	760*	754	710	696
African American	67%	67%	63%	60%	57%	56%
White	31%	31%	33%	37%	39%	40%
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Participation	49%	42%	42%	69%	70%	59%

Source: Georgia Department of Education and Atlanta Title I Office

* The number reported by the Georgia Department of Education for the 1997–98 school year is 689. However the school principal states that from his knowledge of the school during this year, enrollment was closer to 760 students.

Student Achievement

Historically, Inman has been a strong school, especially compared to other Atlanta public schools. This past year, Inman received the prestigious honor of being recognized as one of the top five middle schools in the state of Georgia and one of the top-performing Title I schools in the nation based on student performance.

Inman eighth-graders took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) from 1995–96 to 1999–2000. Data from this test show impressive growth for the school, especially compared to the Atlanta Public School System and the state of Georgia. In reading, Inman's student performance has improved about nine times as much as the state's—18 percent compared to the system's decline of almost 3 percent and the state's increase of 2 percent. In mathematics, Inman's scores have improved by 23 percent compared to the system's growth of 10 percent and the state's growth of 7 percent. This much growth in this short amount of time is especially impressive given that the ITBS is a nationally norm-referenced test.

Table 4: Inman Middle School Eighth-Graders' Performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Year	Average percentile rank: Reading			Average percentile rank: Mathematics		
	Inman	System	State	Inman	System	State
1995–96	55	34	48	60	39	53
1996–97	56	34	48	61	43	54
1997–98	63	35	48	64	43	55
1998–99	66	36	49	70	45	56

Year	Average percentile rank: Reading			Average percentile rank: Mathematics		
	Inman	System	State	Inman	System	State
1999–2000	65	33	49	74	43	57
Growth	18.2%	-2.9%	2.1%	23.3%	10.3%	7.0%

Source: Georgia Department of Education

At the state level, Georgia has implemented a set of tests called the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT) to measure how well the state curriculum is being taught. Again, Inman performs favorably compared to the Atlanta system schools and the state. Ninety-three percent of Inman's eight-graders met or exceeded reading standards in 2000–01, compared to 72 percent at the system level and 82 percent at the state level. In mathematics, for 2000–01, 83 percent of Inman's students met or exceeded standards, compared to 41 percent at the system level and 58 percent at the state level.

Table 5: Inman Middle School Eighth-Graders' Performance on the Criterion Referenced Competency Tests

Year	Percentage meeting or exceeding expectations: Reading			Percentage meeting or exceeding expectations: Mathematics		
	Inman	System	State	Inman	System	State
1999–2000	90	60	75	76	36	54
2000–01	93	72	82	83	41	58

Source: Georgia Department of Education

Portrait of the School

During the 2000–01 school year, Inman Middle School served 696 students, 59 percent of whom were eligible to participate in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. Again, this school serves a unique combination of students. Five homeless shelters send students to Inman. Ethnically and economically diverse students attend the school. With students coming from such different backgrounds, school staff emphasize making all students feel welcomed and treating all students equitably. Staff also want the students to be able to focus on learning. This is accomplished through caring adults paying close attention to school climate and academic rigor. The school was challenged in the 2000–01 school year by the loss of their principal of four years, Don Doran, to a district promotion. In the interim, the school has had two acting principals. Inman's ability to maintain focus in the absence of stable leadership is a testament to its hard-working staff.

Creating a Positive School Climate

Inman's staff understand how important school climate is to their students. Providing a positive school climate means making sure students feel welcomed, happy, and safe at school so that they are able to focus on the real business of school: learning. Staff accomplish this by attending to details and providing students a warm environment. People describe the school as a "happy" place

to be and work. It is a feature they recognize and appreciate, and one that they talk about maintaining.

Providing a Welcoming Environment

Large ceramic vases with topiaries line the school's circular driveway. The lobby feels like a park. The school renovated the circular foyer, building a storefront where school supplies are sold, lining the walls with comfortable benches, and installing park-like lighting. Live plants hang throughout the area and natural light from the glass walls fills the room. Smiling staff faces greet the students as they enter. Two large bulletin boards announce after-school clubs and meeting times. The boards look professionally decorated, with colorful Mardi Gras masks and beading.

Hallway walls feature student-created vocabulary cartoons and book quilts on which students retell story plots in nine colorful squares. Some halls are painted with large murals, mostly with nature scenes. Students have signed their names in the corners of these pieces. An artist-in-residence helped select colors for lockers to brighten up the school. Natural light from tall windows fills each classroom. The school recently has built a brick deck in the center courtyard that includes a raised wooden stage and benches with plants, trees, and birdhouses. This area serves as a place for students to use during lunch or for classes to use for a change of scenery. Even details as small as light bulbs are attended to with diligence. An assistant principal describes attention to these details as part of the school's larger philosophy:

> The maintenance, the foyer, the planters, the benches, the crown molding, all of these things are aesthetic, but they show the love and the compassion and the dedication that the whole community has for the school. . . . What we try to do with that is give them an atmosphere of love. . . . It tells them "I care about you and I want you to be successful."

People who work at Inman talk about the school being a place where adults are able to openly care about students. According to the counselor, students "know that they can walk up to you sometimes and get a free hug". Many teachers speak about liking to come to work each day. One teacher summarizes her appreciation for the school: "Inman is a school that's happy to come to every day. We come in here. We have windows that open out into the world, and sunshine, and we have a courtyard. . . . It makes a difference in the environment" (Teacher Focus Group).

Valuing Respectful and Personal Interactions

Students interact respectfully with staff, while maintaining the freedom to behave as middle grade students. Several strategies ensure that the priority of learning will not be interfered with. These strategies include a focus on reducing discipline infractions, making each student known to adults, paying attention to students new to the school, minimizing the appearance of income differences, and interacting with courtesy.

A no-tolerance policy for discipline infractions greatly helps with the consistent and the equitable treatment of all students. The ex-principal, Don Doran, describes the policy not as punitive but as consequence-focused:

> You can't waver back and forth, and there's consequences to behavior. I'm not angry at them. It's just life, you'll get over it, your parents will survive, and we'll go on. And you just set that tone that there's some absolutes, but it's not punitive.

The school counselors work with new students and new teachers on what is appropriate language for interactions at Inman. Those new to the Inman culture learn that harsh and

discourteous words are inappropriate there. Since students understand what behavior is expected, teachers do not focus on student behavior in their classrooms but are able to concentrate on teaching and learning.

Because of the high percentage of students receiving free or reduced-priced meals, breakfast and lunch are served free to all students. Since the students come from varied backgrounds, this is one way to minimize the appearance of what might be obvious differences.

The school is organized into six grade-level teams with two teams per grade. Each team contains about 120 students. Teams coordinate the material they teach so that both teams in a grade level keep similar schedules. The team configuration means students receive more individualized attention and are more likely to be known by an adult. Because each team is housed in a self-contained wing, travel time between classes is reduced. Teachers also stand in the hall to monitor these transitions. Classes dismiss without bells, eliminating interruptions and reducing noise.

Teaming adds to a schoolwide focus on intimacy, where staff make a point of knowing students well and being aware of their needs. One counselor talks about Inman as being a place especially sensitive to students. She recounts how one student who was labeled a behavior problem at his previous school transferred to Inman and is now doing wonderfully. She believes he has been able to turn his behavior around because the school gave him a second chance and the staff believed in him:

> When they come in the door if you address those behaviors with them and say, "Hey, what's going on with this? This is a new opportunity for you to start fresh," and if they believe that what you're saying is what you really believe, then they'll buy into it. . . . It's just a certain standard we have here. And when you raise the expectations with kids they'll meet you. (Counselor-b)

A teacher feels that the staff at Inman is willing to get to know students and show them that adults care for them. This teacher recalls one student who struggled in class. The teacher's strategy was to "find out exactly why and get parents involved." The teacher made a home visit and learned that the family really struggled financially. A sheet hung in their front entry in place of a door. After this visit, he shared with his team the student's home situation so the team could think of other supports they could offer to the student. The team connected the family with a variety of social services as a result of the home visit. They have also more closely followed the student's academic and emotional progress. He says it gave the team a better perspective.

Interactions between people at the school are marked by respect. Between classes teachers stand in the halls; they call students by name and talk with them in a personal manner: "You can have an intimate enough setting where your people know your kids. . . . When they know you, you can establish a rapport with them" (Counselor-a). Most of these informal interactions relate to completing homework or improving academic success. Students respond with compliance and are generally well behaved and mature for this age group.

Focusing on Academics

Because the school is a comfortable and respectful place, the emphasis can be shifted from maintaining discipline and controlling students to focusing on teaching and learning. More so than anything else, this school is about high achievement. Advanced-level courses are offered and are the norm. For example, regular eighth-grade mathematics has been eliminated and all eighth-graders take pre-algebra, algebra, or geometry. The academic intensity is palpable. Teachers teach the entire class period. Students do not pack their belongings until class has ended. Even as students enter the

building in the morning, they appear focused, with a quiet intent on the business ahead. They walk in with supplies in hand, many pulling overstuffed backpacks on wheels.

Finding Ways to Improve

Teachers discuss the challenge of maintaining and increasing achievement each year. One teacher talks about Inman's work to improve student writing scores, even though 91 percent of students were able to meet or exceed the state writing target. As a staff, they felt it would be difficult to do better, but they wanted to try. The language arts teachers felt their students' writing would improve with more rewriting opportunities. However, grading many rewrites was a very time-consuming process for teachers that often resulted in the return of papers being delayed. The school arranged for community professionals to volunteer to come by and pick up a student's folder with grading instructions such as "Read for noun–verb agreement." The volunteers offered suggestions on the students' work, and this was considered the first draft. This helped ensure that students received immediate feedback and got experience in rewriting, while not creating an unmanageable teacher workload. This year, 98 percent of the students have met or exceeded the state standards on the writing exam. This "find a way" mentality has led to numerous other strategies for improving student achievement.

Providing a Rigorous Curriculum

One strategy Inman uses to improve student performance is the adoption of a rigorous curriculum supplement. The adoption came about because of a state mandate for all elementary and middle schools to implement a reform model. Because the school historically used norm-referenced tests such as the ITBS to measure student performance, Inman wanted to continue to focus on a broad curriculum when selecting a specific reform model. After a year of research and planning, Inman and several of its feeder schools chose to implement a reform model called Core Knowledge.[2] They chose this model because it most reflected what they were already doing. Additionally, the model requires that Core Knowledge be 50 percent of the curriculum, allowing the school discretion in determining the other half of the curriculum. Parents feel this model has increased the rigor and cohesion of the curriculum. Teachers blend Core Knowledge with the state-required curriculum.

Evidence of high achievement is all around the school, from test scores to informal conversations in the halls to student work. The energy of the school constantly reinforces the desire to strive for improvement. Students engage with their work with impressive commitment and focus. For example, sixth-grade students gather in the hallway in diverse groups of four to read aloud an act from Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. Each student holds his or her own book with Post-it® notes on most every page. Students assign roles to each other and begin fluidly reading an act. One teacher passes by a group and asks what all the Post-it® notes are for. A student answers that they are annotations of the text. Asked what that means, another student explains that they "write questions we have about the play on the notes and then when we do inner-outer circle, we talk about the questions." The students clearly understand the purpose of this strategy, articulate it well, and seem to use it readily, judging by the number of notes dangling from each student's book. The teacher is so impressed by their demonstration, she returns with several other teachers to listen to their reading.

Students talk about enjoying the challenge they experience in classrooms. They comment that the classes they like most are those where the teacher would "have certain levels of expectation

[2] For more information, see www.coreknowledge.org.

and keep pushing you and pushing you" (Student Focus Group). They also appreciate teachers who "would teach you things until you got it in your head, until you understood it. She would stay on the subject as long as we needed her to, to get it through our minds" (Student Focus Group). Students are willing to work hard and put in the necessary time to learn challenging material when they feel their teachers are willing to help them and care about their success.

Another testament to the schools' commitment to rigor is their focus on moving students beyond what they know when they come into the school. Staff speak with pride about the accomplishments they have made in this area. This determination permeates their conversations about academic goals. Staff are able recite scores from previous years' tests not only for their school but also for the district and the state.

Using Data to Drive Instruction

A rigorous curriculum and internal determination are only a part of the school's efforts to improve student achievement. The staff also make a concerted effort to use student data in their decision making. School staff are keenly aware of student performance scores: one comments, "We are constantly statistically analyzing ourselves" (Mathematics Teacher-b). They frequently use data to identify areas needing more work. As results come in from tests, teachers anxiously wait to see how their students have scored. The staff take their responsibility to the students very seriously.

The curriculum specialist leads this effort to use data in instructional decision making. A staff member describes him as a "guru" with data. She says that he is not opposed to "putting it out there and seeing it on paper and making people do some self-assessment." The ex-principal describes a situation where he noticed that seventh-grade capitalization scores were low. He approached the teachers and they responded with surprise because they assumed this was something the students learned in elementary school. Now they know to include it as a focus of their instruction.

Part of using data for this school means an intimate knowledge of their students' achievement level. To meet the school's performance goals, staff know they need to keep students out of the bottom quartile. While eating lunch together, staff informally identify students at risk for performing in the bottom quartile. They also meet formally and develop specific goals and objectives for each student they identify, and then provide these students with additional academic resources.

One counselor describes how a teacher was reviewing student scores at midterm to identify students in jeopardy of being retained at the end of the year. This teacher noticed that several of these students shared the same address from a housing project. She brought this information to the attention of others, and together the school began working with the Boys & Girls Club that served that housing project to provide them with progress reports on student performance and resources to help students. These efforts have opened the lines of communication between the school and this community agency. This sort of attention to detail, data, and individual students allows Inman to target resources in areas that would most benefit students.

Not only is achievement test data used extensively, but the school also administers a needs survey to its students and parents to make sure it meets their expectations. The survey is especially helpful in identifying extra services the staff can help provide to families living in homeless shelters. Through this survey, staff have learned they can help people connect with social services, including housing and health care. The survey also indicated the school needed to meet some additional student needs, such as offering supplies and even clothing. The counseling department applied for and received a grant to meet these needs.

Inman uses data as a strategy for improving both student achievement and general school needs. Rather than being intimidated by what the data reveals, the school chooses to view it as

another way to improve. Using data also helps them focus their human resources into the most needy areas.

Attending to all Students

Inman Middle School offers many opportunities for students to receive additional academic services. These services range from classes and programs to informal teacher interventions. The staff consider these extra resources as essential to Inman's ability to continue improving student performance.

The school uses its non-core classes, or exploratory classes, as a way to fortify academic skills. Except for performing arts classes, all exploratory classes focus on academics. Students who struggle with basic material are assigned classes to reinforce certain subjects such as mathematics or reading. Students not struggling with this material can choose other exploratory classes, such as debate or library research, which focus on creative writing.

In addition to rigorous exploratory classes, the school offers 51 after-school programs, most of which are supported by Title I funding and volunteers. Many of these programs are also focused on improving academic skills. Four programs are geared specifically toward supporting struggling students. These include a community-provided program, a district-provided program, a school-provided program, and a program that uses volunteer tutors from local colleges. The community-provided program, Hands on Atlanta, is offered free to the school and students. Hands on Atlanta pays adults for their time through its parent organization. These adults provide tutoring three days a week in any subject area students need. Teachers recommend students who need the most attention for Hands on Atlanta because it has the lowest adult-to-student ratio of all the after-school programs at Inman. The district provides program-hired local teachers to stay after school and tutor. These adults provide tutoring multiple times a week, and again students are identified based on academic need. The school-provided program, Three O'Clock Project, meets both academic and social needs of students. This program provides tutoring as well as after-school care at the school site. Families pay $28 per week for this service, although the program offers a sliding fee scale and scholarships to families demonstrating financial need. Local college students also volunteer to tutor at the school two days a week in mathematics and science.

The school also offers Saturday sessions for review of past work and test preparation: "We have seventeen members of our staff working with about 300 students on test-taking skills" (Curriculum Specialist). All students are encouraged to attend these sessions regardless of their scores on the assessments. One staff member says that students scoring in the 90th percentile could still learn something new just like everyone else.

In addition to the programs already mentioned, the school has a structured tutoring program in which a different subject-area teacher at each grade level stays after school each day to help students. Because grade-level teams coordinate the material they cover, teachers are prepared to help students from either team. Students talk about the accessibility of their teachers as a benefit they often rely on. One student describes this informal tutoring as essential to his success:

> He had tutorial every day, so I just go to him and he, like, helps me. . . . He has like a little group here—he'll, like, help us with the homework and we'll, like, go to the board and he'll tell us what we're doing wrong. He'll show each and every person why. He helps with individual homework. (Student Focus Group)

Many teachers also stay after school and arrive early to offer informal help to interested students. One teacher explains a typical school strategy for helping a struggling student:

> She took [exploratory] math. In the after-school hours, she goes to Hands on Atlanta and she works with a volunteer in reading. . . . She attends a reading enrichment program with me after school. . . . Then she's also been targeted for Saturday school. (Language Arts Teacher)

So this one student is targeted for four programs and receives additional help twice each day. Another teacher shares her strategy for helping struggling students. After noticing that ten of her eighth-graders were scoring in the lowest quartile in reading, she decided to have them tutor ten sixth-graders in the mornings. She also uses this approach as way to build the eighth-graders' self-esteem by giving them the responsibilities of showing up on time and prepared for tutoring, as well as improving their reading skills by providing them more time for practice.

Before students arrive at Inman as sixth-graders, middle school counselors and teachers work with elementary school personnel to place students on different teams and in different homerooms. Placements are based on academics, behavior, and developmental needs to make sure all classes are equally balanced. Staff also attempt to create classes that reflect the diversity of the student population. This process helps ensure balanced teams and minimizes possible conflicts before they arise. Students' progress is then monitored in these same areas and changes are made as needed. Inman also provides programs to make the transition into middle school smoother. Parents find these to be especially helpful:

> I have to credit the transition committees that they have here as far as letting the fourth- and fifth-grade parents know what middle school is like and kind of dispelling all the myths and rumors and untruths that you—you know, you hear the horror stories. (Parent Focus Group)

Entering sixth-graders also go to a weeklong transition program in July before school starts, where they learn study skills that will help them in middle school, such as organization, note taking, and reading strategies. This, too, is an effort on the part of the school to support students and assuage both student and parent fears about middle school.

The middle school, in conjunction with the local high school, has also begun a similar transition program to prepare students to move beyond middle school. This program is in its beginning stages but will be helpful in creating a coherent K–12 neighborhood system:

> We're going to . . . coordinate with the neighborhood high school to get info out about their programs. So now we're starting to sell the middle schoolers on a neighborhood high school and then we started to sell the middle school to the elementary school. We're trying to build a network . . . [for a good] . . . K through high school experience.

School staff and students both indicate that students want to be at school. They like it. They are willing to come early and stay late. The ex-principal feels that if staff are able to involve the students in activities and traditions that make them feel a part of the school, then the students also feel invested in the school and their success there: "We want kids to feel like this school is so important to their lives." To help facilitate these programs, the school tries to eliminate any barriers to student participation. Staff call parents and advise them of available programs and then ask what resources would help their children attend. The school provides scholarship money and sliding fee scales if there are financial barriers. They also provide transportation if necessary.

Capitalizing on Human Resources

None of Inman's accomplishments with students are possible without the dedication and commitment of the adults involved with the school. Caring adults include not only school staff, but also the surrounding community and especially parents.

Setting High Expectations Through Staff

Mr. Doran unhesitatingly describes the staff of Inman Middle School as the backbone of the school. He comments on how moving it was for him to walk through his building at 6 p.m. on any night of the week and see half his staff still at work interacting with students and preparing for the next day. Time after time, people talk about how the staff hold high expectations not only for the students but, more importantly, for themselves. One teacher describes it as an inner drive:

> I just believe in high expectations for myself, number one, because I need to be a role model. And I have this little plaque saying, "The teacher will." So it's not you will, but I will. . . . That's how I look at it; that's my philosophy. (Teacher Focus Group)

Teachers at Inman feel a tremendous sense of responsibility and help one another be successful. They talk about how seeing others work hard makes them want to work hard also:

> I mean, you have to bust your behind and everybody does. And it's like that, kind of that feeling of hard work just kind of moves everybody along. It's like you would feel weird if you were here and you weren't working hard. (Teacher Focus Group)

Teachers discuss the demands not only from the state but also the parents. They must be able to justify what they are teaching, why they are teaching it, and how it benefits the students, as well as how it links to state expectations. Teaching at Inman requires strong instructional and curricular confidence. Teachers who come to Inman do so knowing what will be expected of them. Teachers recount that new teachers must be willing to work or they would not fit in:

> I've seen some people come here and leave because—I guess, as far as the responsibility of what we require here—because they're not willing to commit themselves to that high level of work which we require. Yeah, I mean, you really have to be committed and you have to have a high energy level because everybody just works so hard. (Teacher Focus Group)

Maintaining this level of intensity requires teamwork and support. Teachers look mainly to their grade-level teams for this backing. They talk about their teams being like family and caring about individuals not only as teachers but as people. One teacher shares that she is willing to work harder because "when you feel supported, you do more" (Language Arts Teacher-a). Teachers discuss the difference it makes for them to come to work at a place where they can learn from one another and feel they complement one another. A teacher summarizes it as, "Even when I have a bad day for whatever reason, it's not even comparable to bad days [at other schools] because I know that I have a supportive team and that makes just a tremendous difference" (Science Teacher).

Involving Parents

Parents are another source of support for both students and teachers at Inman. The Parent Teacher Association is large, with about 65 percent of the parents involved; 25 percent of those are very active members. The PTA provides many services to the school and is viewed as very supportive by the staff:

> The PTA is an excellent resource! I have never heard of a PTA like this one at Inman. If you need it, it is there. They will find a way whether it's in the budget or not. If you're adamant about it, they will take care of [it]. (Mathematics Teacher-a)

For example, each year the PTA organizes a fundraiser that has students sell magazine subscriptions. The fundraiser earns over $20,000. The PTA then puts out a request for proposals and funds staff projects with this money. One of these projects included building a supply fund for those students who could not afford materials. The PTA also provides each teacher with $100 at the beginning of each year for start-up costs and produces the school newspaper, Insights. When the school wanted to build a courtyard, staff asked for parent help on the weekends. Parents volunteered their time and materials. Parents volunteer to organize sports banquets, chaperone fieldtrips, run the school store, and help out in classrooms.

The PTA also has become involved with Inman at the district level. Recently, the district planned to increase the number of students at Inman. Because of the size of the building and the overcrowding that already existed, a vocal group of parents from the PTA approached the district and persuaded them to reconsider their plans. Additionally, the PTA was actively involved in the search for a new principal. Parents helped write a job description and advertised for the position in Education Week, a widely circulated education newspaper. In other words, parents come together and help the school whenever needs arise.

At the same time, teachers also talk about the frequent communication they share with parents about student performance. Parents want to know how their children are doing. Teachers accommodate them through team meetings with parents, progress reports, and informal communications. Teachers ask students to keep running tallies of their assignments and their scores so that if a parent wants to know where a student stands in a class, the information is readily available. One parent recalls how her son was so interested he knew down to the decimal point what grade he would need on a test to achieve a certain average. Teachers also talk about the challenge of getting parents prepared for new expectations at Inman:

> We have this tremendous pressure of parents saying, "She was on honor roll all through elementary and you're telling me she's failing. . . . You're not teaching her." And then you have to sit down, and I'm not talking one person. I'm talking, you know, all of the conferences you have and we have them practically every day. [We have to say,] "The standards are different. You know, we know what your child needs to know at this level and, you know, this is the work that I'm seeing." And we have to, like, prove our case. And it's very hard. It makes parents very angry. (Mathematics Teacher-b)

While this sort of parent interaction can be taxing for all involved, the staff appreciate the interest the parents show in their children's achievement. Additionally, staff feel that parents support their instructional and curricular decisions even if parents do not always agree with them.

Building on Community

Extra support from the community helps Inman staff meet the needs of struggling students. The numerous universities in Atlanta are good sources for support. The school has formed relationships with local universities, such as Georgia State, Spellman, and Emory. Some of these partnerships provide the school with student teachers and classroom volunteers. Other university students participate in tutoring, mentoring, and helping facilitate some of the 51 after-school programs.

In addition to the university partnerships, Inman utilizes community professionals. Volunteers are asked to help grade student writing, as described earlier. The school also has set up a student mentoring program where for one year professionals commit to spend one hour a week with a student as their advocate. These volunteers are asked to support the student in whatever capacity is needed, whether it be someone to listen to them or someone to help them with their homework. Over 120 adults participate in this program. Additionally, volunteers help with after-school programs. For example, the students wanted an art club, and so the school solicited help from a local artist who volunteered time with the students.

The resources at Inman help the staff provide enrichment and remediation for students without adding to the workload of an already stretched staff. Over and over, staff talk about how important these resources are to student success.

Story of Change

There is not a neat timeline of events that led to Inman's success. People find it difficult to point to critical change events because of the school's history of strong achievement. It seems the staff have always worked diligently and have always been concerned with high standards. While major events may not mark Inman's history, certain practices and attitudes are identifiable that contributed to Inman's recent growth. This growth is not attributable to an individual but to multiple factors evolving together. Some of these factors were the direct result of Inman staff efforts. These included focusing the curriculum, using data to identify areas for improvement, having daily commitment from staff, and approaching needs resourcefully. Other factors were beyond the school's control but the school used them to its benefit.

Supporting State Standards

Inman did not make changes in a vacuum but rather was influenced by the larger context surrounding the school. This context includes the state accountability system and the district's reaction to the accountability system. The state of Georgia has had the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) and a criterion-referenced test in place for over 20 years. However, only recently the QCC was revised to reflect national standards, and new assessments were designed to measure how well students were learning this new curriculum. These assessments, the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT), were given in 1999–2000 and 2000–01. Until this point, middle schools had administered the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a nationally norm-referenced exam. In the mid-1990s Georgia also developed an incentive program to improve education, the Pay for Performance Program. This program encouraged schools through financial incentives to develop and meet objectives in four categories: academic achievement, client involvement, educational programming, and resource development. The amount of pay was based on how closely objectives were met. Pay could be used in any manner the school staff decided.

Inman Middle School decided to take advantage of the Pay for Performance Program and use it as a way to identify goals and motivate staff. This program, combined with the required curriculum, the ITBS tested material, and the CRCT tested material, guided their improvement process. Teachers talk about Pay for Performance as an incentive. Inman has received the award for the past three years, and each of those years the incentive money has provided a $2,000 bonus for each certified teacher and $400 for non-certified staff. On staff member comments, "When you have monetary incentives, too, then people can feel like okay, all this work—I'm getting something out of this" (Counselor-a).

Leading with Purpose

Don Doran came to Inman in 1997–98 because of his history with improving schools serving a high percentage of students from low-income families. He previously worked at an elementary school that scored at the 32nd percentile on the ITBS when he came in as principal and was at the 68th percentile five years later at the end of his tenure. When he moved to Inman, the school consisted of mostly low-income students scoring above the national average on the ITBS. His goal was to increase this already high student performance.

His philosophy of leading the school was to "quietly, relentlessly observe every detail large or small." His leadership was crucial, but he is the first to say he did not work alone on these initiatives. Rather, he relied on a seasoned and dedicated staff and shared decision making authority with them.

Part of this shared decision making included tremendous instructional freedom for teachers. The administration, including the curriculum specialist and the assistant principals, respected teachers' ability to make decisions in the best interest of students and gave them freedom to make these choices. At Inman, teacher input is welcomed, expected, and accepted. If teachers have ideas or concerns, they feel comfortable voicing these ideas. They see Inman as a place "where parents have a voice, teachers have a voice, students have a voice, and everybody feels comfortable with just expressing how they feel" (Counselor-b).

The staff describes him as the "master of networking" (Counselor-a) and not afraid to "give everyone an opportunity to shine" (Language Arts Teacher-b). One teacher explains,

> The administration set up an atmosphere where they've sought out the teacher involvement, the parent involvement, and community involvement . . . including business partners. . . . He had a vision that if you get all of the players involved in it and get their input on everything, you're not only getting them to buy into what you're doing here, you're getting them to literally buy into providing the financial resources to get there. (Mathematics Teacher-a)

This attitude of sharing decision making and garnering support from all stakeholders allowed the school to provide tremendous resources to its students. At Inman, as at his previous school, Mr. Doran looked for the resources that were available to the school but were underutilized. These resources included those that could be deployed immediately and those that had to be developed over time.

Implementing Immediate Change

Some of the resources the students benefited from were the result of changes that came about soon after Mr. Doran came. Others took more time to evolve. One teacher recalls that his approach was to not "come in and shake up everything all at once. But take his time to assess what's there before and then see what changes need to be made" (Teacher Focus Group). After evaluating the current environment, the principal instituted changes that could be made quickly including emphasizing data, rearranging teams, focusing on discipline, restructuring the school schedule, and rewarding teachers.

With his leadership, one of school's first efforts was to review the curriculum in the context of the state accountability system. The school also started to rely on data to help the staff identify areas for improvement in curriculum and instruction. After these areas were identified, staff addressed these areas through targeted strategies. They identified manageable strands, directed energies toward these targets, and monitored their progress. A teacher shares, "One thing that we do as a school is look at test-taking. . . . We are given test scores and teams of teachers work to address those test scores. I mean, we really pay attention" (Mathematics Teacher-a). This process of

collapsing curriculum and using data to monitor progress has eliminated wasted time and concentrated staff efforts.

Staff also reexamined the team concept. Previously each teacher had taught in two subject areas. After assessing each teacher's strengths, administrators moved teachers to being responsible for only one subject area. This way each teacher could concentrate on building content knowledge in one area rather than in two to maximize teachers' strengths.

Staff also consider discipline as a previous impediment to teaching and learning. Teachers wanted discipline under control so they could focus on instruction rather than spending their time managing behavior. Teachers view the administration as being "very focused and really pushing discipline. Being polite but consistent. The key [was] a safe environment" (Teacher Focus Group). Others see the leadership as having "really cracked down on the teachers as far as disciplining children and making them face consequences." Discipline referrals revealed that most infractions occurred during the last ten minutes of each block period, so the school decided to eliminate block scheduling and return to a traditional schedule. Administrators also strictly enforced a no-tolerance policy based on the student–parent handbook, which outlines the staff's expectations for student behavior. Consequences for misbehavior are immediate. The assistant principal in charge of discipline reports that infractions decreased significantly. She is now able to recall each individual infraction with intimate detail because they are so few.

Mr. Doran also focused on ways of motivating teachers. In addition to the Pay for Performance Program, he made it his priority to find ways to make teachers feel appreciated for their long hours and dedication. He talked about "constantly looking for ways to reward staff" and not looking at this haphazardly but very carefully. He found that intentional and sincere public recognition as well as private recognition helped to create an environment of professionalism and respect among the staff. He felt that it was his "job as principal to demand of [his] staff and know exactly how far I can push them and make them feel good about it."

Because of these efforts, student performance began to increase from its already high levels. These gains have contributed to the rewarding feeling that teachers' efforts are paying off. Staff have created an achievement momentum where success and high expectations have become the norm.

Implementing Long-Term Change

Once a few of the immediate changes were in place, energy could be redirected. The school focused on increasing parental and community support of the school as well as building a culture of success. These changes could not have occurred if the others were not in place first.

As the overall performance of the school improved, Mr. Doran began to turn his attentions toward making Inman a true neighborhood school. He saw that many families in the area were choosing private education over the local system. He and his staff began an aggressive marketing campaign to sell the school to local residents. He felt the community did not know what Inman offered academically and developmentally for their children. They began educating these possible clients. The school hosted "coffees with the principal." Counselors also attended these meetings, which occurred twice a month—once for parents of prospective students to tell them about what the school offered and once for parents of current students to make sure the school was meeting their needs. These efforts resulted in attracting more neighborhood children to the school because it is an economical and academically sound option to an otherwise costly private education. In addition to attracting more students, this marketing campaign also helped create a very active PTA.

As principal, he also worked with the larger Atlanta community, attracting many volunteers. He was able to draw in abundant human resources, including partnerships with large organizations, such as universities and volunteer programs. This attention to human capital allowed the school flexibility and depth in offering both academic and developmental supports to students. Many of the

partners who work with the school view the relationship as mutually beneficial to them. These relationships have allowed the school to provide students with a variety of enrichments and services without overburdening teachers.

Critical to Inman's continued improvement was the culture of success that evolved among the staff. Teachers were committed to helping students meet high expectations, and they worked hard each day to achieve this. Many stayed long hours after school to help with extracurricular programs or tutor students. This sort of commitment was an expectation of this school and was nonnegotiable. Over and over, people expressed admiration for one another. One teacher stated, "I have to say that ever since I came in, the teachers continue to blow me away with their commitment and hard work" (Teacher Focus Group).

These people chose to work under intense circumstances. They saw its rewards. One teacher commented that she felt that "a certain type of school attracts certain types of teachers. . . . [At Inman] you have these teachers that I feel gravitate for special reasons and they have high energies because they want to do something" (Language Arts Teacher). Now that the school has been ranked fifth in the state, some worried about being able to maintain this level of intensity, but they welcomed the challenge as part of what it takes to work at Inman Middle School. Many described Inman as a "sink or swim" atmosphere where less than the best would not be accepted or tolerated by colleagues or administration.

With its intense pressure on staff to perform, Inman was not for everyone. However, the reputation of the school was so strong that there was a waiting list to teach there, and those who came knew exactly what was expected of them. Students also understood that they could count on the commitment of their teachers to help them be successful and meet high standards: "I really like [the teachers] because they're always there for me when I need somebody. . . . They would explain every subject to me and I want those kinds of teachers" (Student Focus Group).

Moving Forward

Inman Middle School is near the top in the state of Georgia in terms of student performance, and they are searching for ways to maintain their success. They have plans to continue their vigilant use of data and academic intensity. They would like to increase the school's academic rigor by offering more high school–level courses, such as geometry. However, the staff recognizes a need to balance this with the developmental needs of the students and not "push them too far" (Counselor-a). The school is also exerting great effort in finding the right person to replace Mr. Doran. They feel this person can be critical for Inman's future, and they see a need to find a person who matches with the community's values. They see this as a challenge because of the unique characteristics the previous principal brought to his position in terms of community connections, interest in working with a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, and commitment to assessing the school's progress.

Inman also wants to focus attention on continuing to build a strong neighborhood feeder pattern. While the school has made headway with the elementary schools, they are still committed to improving the feeder pattern into the neighborhood high school. They intend to achieve this through working closely with the high school staff to make sure Inman students enter high school prepared, as well as making certain middle school parents know the strengths of the neighborhood high school and trust that it can provide their children with a quality education. While this school is still looking for ways to improve, it represents an impressive model of a high-performing school.

John F. Kennedy Middle School

Utica City School District

Utica, New York

John F. Kennedy Middle School

Utica, New York

John F. Kennedy Middle School is located in Utica, a mid-sized town in the heart of New York state. Over the last three years, Utica and its school district have taken on an international atmosphere with the admission of more than 10,000 refugees into the community. Utica has a longstanding tradition of welcoming immigrants. In the nineteenth century, immigrants from Italy, Ireland, and Poland moved into the community and helped make Utica a thriving industrial town along the Erie Canal. In the last four decades, however, factories have closed and people have moved away because of the rising unemployment. Utica's population, which was 125,000 in 1960, dropped to 92,000 by 1975, and was down to 64,000 by 1999.[3] To reverse this trend, Utica became a host for refugees from countries such as Bosnia, Belarus, and Vietnam. With federal aid, Utica opened service agencies to help the newcomers get established in their new homeland. One of these agencies, the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, is located within the attendance boundaries of John F. Kennedy Middle School. As an effect of immigration, Utica has been making a slow recovery from its economic crisis. For example, the newcomers opened new shops and businesses and revived the housing market. It will take time, though, before most of the economic challenges are overcome.

State Context

The state of New York has established a rigorous accountability system in the last decade. In 1991, the state adopted the New Compact for Learning, which was aimed at raising school standards and performance. In 1996, the Regents approved the State Learning Standards for seven subject areas.[4] Each learning standard covers the elementary, intermediary, and commencement level. All standards are available at *www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/pub.html*. In 1999, a new state test was introduced that was closely aligned with the new state learning standards; this test is administered in grades 4 and 8 in mathematics and in grade 8 in English Language Arts. This test consolidated and replaced the Pupil Evaluation Program tests in mathematics and reading for grades 3 and 6 and the Preliminary Competency Tests in reading and writing in grades 8 or 9.

With regard to graduation exams, New York is currently in a transitory phase. The Regents Competency Tests, which are not mandatory, are being phased out during the period 1999–2004. Under the revised graduation requirements, however, high school students are required to take and pass Regents examinations that reflect higher standards in English, mathematics, science, and social studies in order to graduate. These new examinations are administered three times a year. Teachers decide when the students are ready to take these exams during their high school years. Some tests can be administered as early as eighth and ninth grade.

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[3] See Paul Zielbauer, "Looking to Prosper as a Melting Pot; Utica, Long in Decline, Welcomes an Influx of Refugees," *New York Times*, 7 May 1999; Richard Reeves, "Refugees Revitalizing Utica," *Buffalo News*, 11 May 1999; Robert B. Ward, "Immigrants Could Bring New Vitality to Region," *Buffalo News*, 8 July 2001.

[4] The learning standards cover Arts; Career Development and Occupational Studies; English Language Arts; Languages Other Than English, Including American Sign Language; Mathematics, Science, Technology; Physical Education, including Health and Family and Consumer Sciences; and Social Studies.

School Demographics

John F. Kennedy Middle School has become a very large school that served more than 1,000 students in grades 7, 8, and 9 during the 2001–02 school year. The student body included a high percentage of Bosnian and Russian immigrants. In 2001–02, 22 percent of JFK's students were categorized as English as a Second Language students. Ten percent of the students were of Hispanic origin, and 16 percent were categorized as African American.

The economic challenges of the Utica region were reflected in the student population as well. More than 60 percent of students participated in the federally funded free or reduced-price lunch program for the 2001-02 school year.

Table 6: John F. Kennedy Middle School Student Demographics

Demographic Factors	2001–02
Enrolled	1,003
African American	16%
Hispanic	10%
White	71%
English as a Second Language	22%
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Participation	61%

Source: John F. Kennedy Middle School records

Student Achievement

In spite of the shift in demographics and the economic challenges, John F. Kennedy Middle School students have shown impressive improvements in their performance on the New York State Assessment Test. When this test was introduced in the spring of 1999 to assess students on the state learning standards, JFK students' scores in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA)[5] were so low the school staff decided to focus their improvement efforts on developing curriculum that met the learning standards addressed on the state assessment.

The efforts have paid off. In spring 2000, the eighth-graders rose above state averages in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA). In the spring of 2001, the eighth-graders surpassed even the school's strong results from its previous year, scoring 14 percentage points in ELA and 12 percentage points in mathematics above the state average passing rate. Cumulatively between 1999 and 2001, the student performance has improved by 87 percent in ELA and by 200 percent in mathematics.

[5] In New York state, the term "English Language Arts" (ELA) includes reading, writing, listening, and speaking and how these skills are applied. For more information, see www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/ela/elarg.html (accessed 15 April 2002).

Table 7: John F. Kennedy Middle School Eight-Graders' Performance on the New York State Assessment Test

Year	Percentage passing: English/Language Arts (ELA)		Percentage passing: Mathematics	
	School	State	School	State
1998–99	32	48	17	38
1999–2000	49	45	42	40
2000–01	59	45	51	39
Growth 1999–2001	87%	-6%	200%	3%

Source: New York State Education Department

In addition to the eighth-grade state assessment test, some students also take parts of the Regents graduation examinations. These exams are mandatory to receive the high school diploma. These results, however, cannot be compared across schools because only a limited number of students participated in these exams at the intermediate level.

Portrait of the School

The campus sits near a neighborhood with public housing units and small, well-maintained single-family homes. John F. Kennedy Middle School was originally built to be a high school during the 1960s. In 1987, the district went through a consolidation phase, and the campus became a junior high school. Several district-led grade reconfigurations followed, including shifting JFK from a grades 6–8 school to a grades 7–9 school. When funding became available in 1995, the district decided to move toward a magnet school model. All schools, including JFK, became magnet schools. By practicing open enrollment and admitting all neighborhood students first, both of the district's middle schools function as neighborhood schools and feed into Procter High School, the only high school in the district.

Creating a Positive School Climate

John F. Kennedy Middle School is characterized by a positive school climate focused on attention to three areas: academic standards, discipline policies, and staff dedication to meet the students' needs. Attention to these areas is ensured through the principal's vigilance.

Recognizing Academic Success

Display cases and bulletin boards are set up in the hallway outside the principal's office to recognize exemplary students. Photographs of "Students of the Month" are displayed in one case. Newspaper clippings about the success of the school are posted on another board nearby. Outstanding student achievements are recognized in the school newsletter and through postings on the campus web page. Teachers also acknowledge students' achievements through correspondence with parents. Impressed with her daughter's progress at John F. Kennedy Middle School, a parent expresses that JFK "actually taught my daughter how to study" (Parent Focus Group). Parents feel proud of what JFK has achieved. A parent remarks that

> I'm proud that my students have gone through this school and very proud of what the school has done—the recognition it has gotten in the last few years. And the improvements each year seem to have been better and better. (Parent Focus Group)

Fostering a Safe Environment

The students express that they feel safe and secure at their school. Security officers patrol the building to ensure smooth transitions between classes and to provide constant supervision. Hall monitors are seated at strategic points throughout the building. The principal and assistant principals carry walkie-talkies so that they can be in constant communication with security personnel.

The school climate can be characterized as having a focus on discipline and order. A teacher describes the school as organized and in control. Comparing JFK to other schools, teachers find JFK well ordered which makes it a better place to teach. Teachers and parents believe that the strict discipline fosters a good learning environment. Teachers state that without discipline other goals are difficult to accomplish. One parent says that he is "thrilled at the discipline aspect in this school. . . . I feel safe with my kids coming here" (Parent Focus Group).

Expressing Consistent Dedication

The teachers consider themselves to be advocates for all JFK students—not just those listed on their own classroom rosters. According to one teacher, "It's not my kid, or your kid. It's our kids. And whether we're teaching them or not, I think the kids know that" (Teacher-b). Students agree with this observation and believe that teachers are always willing to help students who are not their own, even in different subject areas.

Teachers agree that it is nothing special "to see a teacher walking through the halls and stopping to talk to some students about a problem they're having, whether it's a math problem or a social problem" (Teacher-a). Teachers interact personally with students in the hallway. One asks how the student is doing, and the student responds that she is—thanks to her teachers—back on track again after personal and academic problems.

In both academic and disciplinary issues, staff emphasize consistency throughout the school. Teachers regard it as a joint effort to make sure every student succeeds. By working closely together, teachers want to send a message to their students: "All the teachers in this building are very, very dedicated to working with the kids and they really want the kids to succeed. . . . I think the kids pick up on the fact that all of the faculty, we're not cliquey, we try to all work together" (Teacher Focus Group). Comparing JFK to other schools, a parent notices an "academic change" in her daughter's performance because "teachers are more involved with the students." She thinks that her daughter is now well-prepared for high school.

Focusing on Academics

At JFK, teachers and administrators complement each other's efforts to support students. The administrators support teachers by providing the necessary resources and by providing an environment that is conducive to learning. For example, the administration sets programs in place to keep the attendance rate in the classroom high. The teachers, in turn, are responsible for working directly with the students to foster their individual learning.

Teachers regard class time as an important opportunity to get things done, since they can count on continuity through a strict attendance policy. Class time is an important time when teachers foster students' higher-order thinking skills and when they focus on learning standards. Teachers make sure that additional academic support is available for students who want or need it.

Teachers map out plans for students at risk of failing and help students learn to manage their learning time.

Emphasizing Critical Thinking and Learning Standards

Teachers challenge their students. A mathematics teacher says that his main goal is helping his students think. He wants his students to understand that mathematics problems involve more than just getting the right numbers. Students need to understand that problem solving involves drawing conclusions, recognizing relationships, and combining different concepts. In an effort to foster critical thinking, another mathematics teacher has developed a two-step process. First, she lets the students work in small groups to discuss a particular mathematics problem. Students have to verbally articulate what the problem is and how it will be solved. Next, she asks the students to present the thoughts to the class and finally to solve the problem on paper. To keep the students engaged, teachers prepare dense lesson plans, asking students to connect different concepts. Some examples require students to combine concepts from different subject areas. Teachers note that they do more integrated work in math topics, and that each topic taught is intertwined with other content areas. This connected learning helps students prepare for the state assessment. For example, teachers show their students how one problem, such as a graph, could combine different methods, using trigonometry, algebra, and geometry at the same time.

Social science teachers frequently use document-based questions in their classrooms. This approach is appealing because they can integrate text from a variety of sources, such as newspaper articles or documentary texts, into their curriculum. They regard the document-based approach as an effective method that teaches students how to think. Depending on the document, the teachers ask the students to perform several tasks to practice higher-order thinking skills, such as synthesizing information from different sources or applying an idea from one subject area to another.

To make sure they cover what students will be required to know on the state assessment, teachers plan their units by listing the particular learning standards they want to teach. They identify the standards as driving testing. Teachers discuss the learning standards with the students to help them better understand what they are expected to know. They put the standards in user-friendly language, post them in their classrooms, and hand them out to each student at the beginning of the school year. Sometimes, before starting a new unit, a teacher lets students copy the corresponding state standards. As a result, students are aware of the standards. Teachers cover more than what would have been required to meet the standards for the test. Talking about test preparation, a student explains that "we actually did more than we should have. Like, we did extra stuff and we did a lot more stuff." According to this student, teachers "just wanted us to be prepared" (Student Focus Group).

Reinforcing Academics

The principal conveys the school's philosophy of practice and reinforcement: "You have to reinforce. Reinforcement is the key." Students welcome this idea:

> And when we go over stuff, it's not like a one-day thing and next day we're moving on. We go through it and do homework on it. The next day we come in and go over it, then we do more and then we move on. (Student Focus Group)

When classroom instruction is not sufficient to meet a student's needs, students can attend the ongoing tutorial sessions or work one-on-one with teachers. Academic Intervention Services (AIS)6 monies are used to fund mathematics and ELA tutorials. Teachers uses student assessment results from the end of the last school year to identify students who need additional help in mathematics and ELA, so they know before the new school year starts which students will need AIS tutorials. Teachers inform the parents of the reasons why their child will be getting additional services and when these services will be provided. AIS tutorials are directly written into the students' schedules the first day of school in the fall, so that students are able to receive help immediately. The tutorials are held two to three times a week in small groups and are mandatory for students who have been identified as needing such services. Other tutorials are offered to eighth-grade students throughout the year to allow them to refresh their memories and practice using knowledge and skills they have studied in the classroom and that they have to master for the state assessment. Each afternoon a different core subject, such as mathematics, ELA, social studies, science, or technology, is addressed.

Students can go to their teachers directly for help under a more informal support system. Although the school day normally ends for students at 2:15 p.m., teachers are required by contract to stay until 3 p.m. Teachers encourage students to take advantage of that 45-minute period to get additional help. Students appreciate the fact that "teachers [are] there every day after school for help" (Student Focus Group). Teachers also frequently stay after 3 p.m. to help students. School buses run three times in the afternoon (at the end of the official school day, at 3 p.m. and at 3:35 p.m.) to provide students with a safe ride home. Some teachers even hold tutorial labs during their lunch period to provide students with extra help. In addition to these opportunities, Saturday tutorials are offered before statewide examinations.

Identifying and Monitoring Struggling Students

Teachers promptly identify struggling students and regularly monitor their progress. Teachers prepare midterm progress reports in addition to the regular grade reports that students are required to take home. The principal also monitors grades each marking period and compares these grades with the progress reports issued during the middle of the marking period. He emphasizes that no student is going to fall through the cracks. The principal asks teachers to identify students who are experiencing difficulties on a weekly basis and requires that they document the services that will be made available for each student. In particular, when a student is identified as needing help, the student's teachers have to fill out a form explaining how they plan to help the student succeed. They are asked to identify the right kind of service for each individual student. Each week, teachers have to record what progress the student has made and what additional support they have given this student. Teachers continue to closely monitor students until they have caught up in the lagging subject. Through this monitoring and documentation process, teachers are responsible for a student's progress and are held accountable for their performance.

Helping Students Manage and Organize Their Learning Time

To help students learn to manage and organize their learning time, the curriculum director introduced the agenda book. The agenda book had been used successfully at the elementary school level in the Utica City School District and proved to be equally successful at the middle school level. At the beginning of the school year, each student receives an agenda book—an 8 1/2" by 11" notebook with a ring binding. Two pages are assigned to each week—a column per day with

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[6] Academic Intervention Services are funded by New York state to assist low-achieving students in meeting the state learning standards. For more information, see www.emsc.nysed.gov/part100/pages/topics.html (accessed 11 April 2002).

sections for each core subject, for electives, and for after-school activities. The students are required to carry the agenda book with them throughout the school day. Students copy their homework assignments into the corresponding sections of the agenda book, and students are required to check off assignments that they have completed. In some cases, teachers require students to document the time they spent on assignments. The teachers check agenda book entries to ensure that students effectively use the books. Students receive a grade for the use of their agenda book. Teachers characterize the agenda books as the students' "lifeline in this building" (Teacher Focus Group). These books are also the source for other important information. The first part of each agenda book includes the district policies and addresses study skills. Language arts teachers are assigned to review study skills, but other teachers also refer to these skills in their classrooms because they think this helps students work more efficiently throughout the year.

Teachers use the agenda book to communicate with parents as well. For example, they note the times when students are required to stay for after-school tutorials. Parents are often asked to sign the book to acknowledge the completion of homework assignments. Parents like this two-way communication because they always know what is going on without having to call teachers.

Supporting Teachers

Expectations are high for all staff members. A teacher explains that the principal "expects a lot from us. . . . But he doesn't expect more from us than he expects from himself" (Teacher-c). Teachers at JFK receive support from many directions. They help each other with lesson plans, mentor new teachers, and get the necessary resources they need from the administration.

Collaborating on Teaching

When asked what has affected his instruction the most, an experienced teacher and department leader responds that "the greatest impact . . . is from my colleagues. They really set the mark for me. . . . They just set a standard for me that sometimes I have trouble running to catch up to them. They are really a great staff" (Teacher-b). Teachers encourage each other to set high expectations and to help others reach them.

Staff know each other well and enjoy spending time together. This atmosphere is not restricted to the teachers, but includes any person working at the school: "Here it's a very open type of environment, that you're all interacting with faculty members all day long, whether it's a teaching assistant, substitute, custodian" (Teacher-c). One teacher who also teaches part-time on another campus in the district believes that the willingness of teachers and administrators to help each other is an important factor in their students' high academic achievement. As a result of this mutual support, teachers are "all part of the same team trying to do the same thing" (Teacher-b).

Each department has a small work area that is maintained by the department leaders. The science office, for example, is equipped with a computer, a small copier, supplies, a coffee maker, and a refrigerator sponsored by the science team leader. File cabinets contain folders of teaching materials and class units that are made available to any teacher. School staff like to go there in the morning to have coffee and talk.

Because the individual department work areas are too small for teachers to meet and work together, teachers commonly gather in the faculty lounge. Teachers state that they go there on a daily basis during their planning or lunch period to work together. The room is used for informal common planning between pairs or small groups of teachers—either within the department or between the departments. The advantage of spending their planning time in the faculty lounge is that whenever teachers have a question or a good idea, they can talk to each other. This room is

especially important for those teachers who do not have their own permanently assigned classrooms due to a lack of space.

Although JFK does not have interdisciplinary teams in place, teachers know what their colleagues are teaching. Working together is the norm for teachers, and they seek each other out and show a genuine interest in what their colleagues are doing. A teacher explains, "Through cooperation and department and faculty meetings, the professional staff seems to be on the same page with one another" (Teacher Survey). Although teachers often have different viewpoints, they act as a team when it comes to supporting students and working on assessments. When a ninth-grade teacher, for example, has successfully introduced a new teaching strategy or handout, she cannot wait to share it with the other ninth-grade teachers. Some teachers also use their preparation periods to help out in another teacher's classroom.

Teachers plan across departments. The mathematics teachers work with language arts teachers to improve the students' writing skills. The mathematics teachers, for example, introduce math journals and more word problems with critical thinking questions. They encourage students to practice explaining in writing the mathematical process and how they arrive at a solution. An exploratory teacher developed his own strategy to ensure that his teaching is in line with the other teachers. He typically leaves a note with a calendar in his colleagues' mailboxes to get feedback about what areas they are going to cover in the next month. He explains that, using the feedback, he tries "to correlate all my classes to enforce the kinds of skills that they're learning in math and they're learning in social studies" (Teacher Focus Group). He would, for example, teach students to draw maps to reinforce their measuring skills. Teachers see that working together allows consistency across classrooms and exposes their students to different perspectives on the same topic. Students are able to grasp the concepts more quickly because they "see the connection; they see that everything is interrelated" (Teacher Focus Group).

In addition to planning time during the morning, all teachers have time on their own between 2:15 and 3:00. This time can be spent in several ways, depending on student needs. Teachers are able to tutor students on a one-on-one basis or get together with colleagues for lesson planning. A teacher affirmed,

> I feel that the teaching staff has done a remarkable job. We do get common planning time built into our schedules, but we make the time to get together to share ideas and best practices. The teachers all work well together, and I feel this is very important. (Teacher Survey)

Integrating New Teachers

Although the teacher turnover rate at JFK is quite low and the majority of teachers have been at the school for more than 10 years, new teachers join the staff each year. Experienced teachers help newcomers make the transition to become part of the team and make sure that they have everything they need. The principal, curriculum specialist and team leaders meet with new teachers to help develop lesson plans before the semester starts. This practice ensures that "the new people are really taken right under the wing" (Teacher-c). In addition, staff established a mentoring program for new teachers. During a new teacher's first three years, an experienced teacher serves as a mentor. A new mathematics teacher states that she can approach her mentor whenever she needs advice:

> Any questions I had, any concerns, if I wasn't sure how, . . . he was there to help me. [For] any problems he was right there . . . and we would meet whenever, during free time, during the school day, before school, after school.

The new teachers also receive support from their departments. Other teachers are willing to share their own lesson plans and other useful materials with them. In addition to providing support for incoming teachers, the curriculum director also serves as the Academic Intervention Services specialist, and she is the first person that teachers approach when they are struggling with classroom management.

After teachers have been at JFK for three years, they are supported by peer coaching, where they are paired with another teacher in a different department. Throughout the year, they observe the other teacher's classroom and focus on certain domains where they want to improve, such as classroom management. After the observations, the teachers take the time to specifically talk about strengths and weaknesses of the lesson and about ways to improve. Teachers generally seem willing to accept their peers' suggestions. One teacher notes that

> it's so wonderful to be able to discuss with your coworker things that are working and things that are not, and to have the other person so receptive and willing to hear, "I have to do a better job this year" without any hesitation, without any conflict in there at all. (Teacher Focus Group)

Building Resources

The principal is very supportive when teachers approach him and document their need for resources. The principal's office door and the lines of communication are always open. Teachers express amazement that he is always able to find resources when they need it the most. This resourcefulness was especially important during the first year of the new state assessment tests when teachers needed new textbooks. Teachers agree that the principal makes sure that they get the necessary resources and he always asks what else they need in order to help their students perform well: "What can we do to help you out? What do you need?" (Teacher-b).

The principal tries to handle situations in a timely manner before they become serious problems. He pays close attention to requests from the faculty affairs committee, which deal with facility operations among other issues, and tries to deal with these requests in a day or two. He documents how issues have been resolved. For example, he responded immediately to a request for better lighting in the school parking lot.

The principal works closely with the curriculum specialist and team leaders to make things happen for JFK. They are very proactive in working with the district's central office to secure additional grant funding for the middle school campus. In one instance, JFK leadership approached the district to collaborate on a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grant.[7] They applied for this grant and ultimately received the award.

Story of Change

About four years ago, three significant events occurred simultaneously for J.F.K. Middle School: international refugees started to settle in Utica in significant numbers; New York state introduced a new assessment system; and a new principal came on board. The first two events required John F. Kennedy Middle School to change the way it operated. Under the leadership of the new principal, the middle school successfully dealt with these changes.

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[7] The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration program "aims to raise student achievement by helping low-income and low-achieving public schools across the country to implement successful, comprehensive school reforms that are based on reliable research and effective practices." For more information, see the U.S Department of Education website at www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform (accessed 16 April 2002).

Responding to a Demographic Shift

Teachers were not prepared for the sudden influx of immigrant students who did not understand the English language. A teacher recalled this situation: "You can't imagine what it was like to have 24 students in class and have only 12 that could speak English" (Teacher-a). To make matters more difficult, some students were illiterate in their native languages. Many of the students were not prepared for their new situations. Some had left their home countries overnight because their families sought political asylum. The families had not yet been integrated into the community that would become their new home.

Integrating Students

With so many immigrant students on campus, it was necessary for the middle school staff to become sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the international students. A teacher recalls that he reevaluated the way he did routine things, "from the way we took them off the bus to the way we said goodbye to them in the evening. I mean, it really changed our thinking on every single level—socially, academically" (Teacher-d). A teacher shares a story about a group of international students who sat in the cafeteria at lunchtime, surrounded by food, but not taking a bite. After some inquiries, staff found out that these students were celebrating Ramadan, when they fast during daytime for several weeks. To keep these students from the temptation of food that they were not allowed to consume, the school started to run movies in the media room during lunch.

Teachers made and still make special efforts to help international students feel "that this is their school" (Teacher-a). Art became an important subject for the first weeks after a new student's arrival. Students could use different media such as drawing or painting to express themselves when language posed a barrier: "We tried to give the students as many different outlets to express themselves and to feel that they belong" (Teacher-a). The drama club was revitalized as an opportunity for immigrants to integrate themselves into the school community. Teachers offered tutorials throughout the day and spent extra time with the international students during lunch periods and after school. It was rewarding for teachers to see how quickly their efforts showed positive results, and many of the immigrant students were speaking English in three or four months. Classroom projects with international focus became important. The social science teachers integrated a theme about different cultures and religions of the world into their curriculum. The library acquired books about foreign countries and cultures, and they displayed the titles in a prominent place to catch the students' attention. Teachers encouraged students to use these books in their projects.

JFK has become a regular participant in Ethno-City, a districtwide community event that helps community members gain a better understanding of each other. As part of the event, students represent foreign countries, invite speakers, set up booths, and prepare international food to sample. The school has worked diligently to facilitate the integration of immigrant students into the community, and its students want to become friends with immigrant students.

Focusing on Instruction

Responding to the needs of international students, teachers reconsidered everything they did in the classroom to make sure all their students were able to follow the class. Rethinking the way of teaching ultimately benefited the *whole* student body since teachers adopted new strategies to support not only international students, but all students in their learning. A teacher remembers: "When the refugees started coming over, it really forced me to—you know—to obviously change some of the things I did" (Teacher-b). A teacher shares how the new students inspired her: "They're an education for me. I see things that they do that we don't do that I'm really interested in, like, for instance, . . . a lot of collaborative learning" (Teacher-d). This teacher observed that the new

students had a tradition of helping each other on assignments and test preparation. As a result, the teacher started to do more collaborative learning activities in her classroom, such as having students work together while exploring the longitude and latitude of a map. She motivated each student's participation and explained that group work is only effective if every student feels responsible for the overall project.

A teacher explains that individual student needs and skills had the most impact on how she taught. Teachers moved away from "chalk and board" toward "hands-on" teaching (Teacher Focus Group). A teacher expresses that for him invention became "the mother of necessity" (Teacher-d). Inspired by the sheltered classes approach,[8] teachers began to make content-area material more comprehensible by including visual aids, props, or interactive lectures in the regular classroom. Teachers read more aloud in the classroom, because they observed that their international students were able to better grasp subject matters through this method. A mathematics teacher started using visual devices in her classroom to help students understand the problems. Teachers exposed students to mathematics applications in their own lives to help them remember the concepts more easily.

To foster applied learning, a work study program has been initiated, where ninth-graders are exposed to real world situations. This applied focus has been even more emphasized by the Millennium Project, a partnership between the Utica City School District and Mohawk Valley Community College.[9] Middle and high school students have the opportunity to participate in shadowing programs, in which they spend several weeks in a community workplace.

Leading with Purpose

Four years ago, after JFK had been under the one-year leadership of an interim principal, Mr. Karam became the school's principal. He had been an assistant principal at Procter High School, the only high school in the district. When he arrived at JFK, he took the initiative to implement clear procedural guidelines to ensure an effective learning environment and to address low student achievement.

Managing Assessment and Discipline

In general, the principal was characterized as a "superb manager" who expected total commitment from his staff. He used faculty meetings effectively by announcing meetings well in advance and preparing detailed agendas. During faculty meetings, he clearly outlined how the tests and exams were going to be conducted, to the point of providing packets individualized for teachers in different subject areas.

The principal put procedures in place that allowed teachers to focus their efforts and attention on student learning. He was described as a strict disciplinarian, a reputation he had gained while serving as an assistant principal at the high school. To ensure that all employees understood campus procedures, he held meetings at the beginning of the school year to discuss the discipline policy and procedures for hall duty, detention, homeroom, and attendance (Artifact-a). To eliminate any guesswork, teachers received a binder that described the protocol in detail.

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[8] Taught by regular classroom teachers, sheltered classes are content classes that include a variety of techniques to help students develop academic competence while also acquiring English proficiency. For more information, see the U.S. Department of Education website at www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed301070.html (accessed 11 April 2002).

[9] For more information, see the Millennium Project's website at myschoolonline.com/folder/0,1872,6912-23807-4-29470,00.html (accessed 18 April 2002).

Having discipline procedures clearly articulated helped teachers to focus their efforts and attention on student learning. Students knew that they would receive a detention if they were not in the classroom when the bell rang. Students also knew that they would be picked up by campus security if they missed the after-school tutorials. Teachers could either give disruptive students an afternoon detention or contact an assistant principal who would meet with the student. To ensure consistency, any teacher could give a student a detention even if the student was not in that teacher's class; this helped control the amount of misbehavior in the hallway and other areas outside the classrooms.

JFK staff were sensitive about disciplinary measures not interfering with a student's academic support. For example, they put a program in place to help suspended students keep up with their course work. Suspended students were required to come to campus for two hours a day after the regular students were dismissed. The teacher who supervised the suspension program tried to make the experience as productive as possible by keeping notes on each student and by contacting teachers to get daily worksheets and assignments. She also encouraged the students to meet with their teachers face-to-face during that time. The suspension teacher's experience was that "kids will react totally different when they have a teacher coming personally to them" (Teacher-c).

Addressing Low Achievement

When the new state test for the eighth-graders was administered in the spring of 1999, the current principal had just come in. The results were extremely low—68 percent of the eighth-graders failed the ELA tests and 83 percent failed the mathematics test. The principal recalls that the school was "in shock." He immediately met with the curriculum specialist and the team leaders, among others, to address the situation. Their initial step was to analyze "what happened?" or "what is not happening?" (Principal). They disaggregated the student test data to identify the students' weak areas. They found that students at risk of failing were not adequately supported. They also realized that no consistent practice or curriculum existed from classroom to classroom. Teachers were competent, but they were on their own. Furthermore, teachers did not have adequate learning materials that reflected the statewide standards. Textbooks that addressed the new standards were not yet on the market.

Their next step was to find ways to improve the situation: "When the state came in with the new stuff we knew we had to do something differently because it wasn't going to get done unless we all helped each other out. I would say that's what really prompted [the change]" (Teacher-b). At that time, the principal made clear to the whole school staff that they had no choice but to work hard to get results. First, the school introduced the after-school tutorial program to help students "reinforce skills and concepts that they were learning during the day in classes" (Principal). Second, teachers contacted the parents whose children were at risk of failing. Third, staff re-aligned the curriculum with the new standards. Fourth, staff worked with the students on their test-taking skills. They let students take practice tests to get acquainted with the test situation. With regard to writing, the teachers used student answers on an anonymous basis to illustrate what good writing looked like and what to avoid. Teachers found some standards-based materials on the Internet and shared these resources with each other. As soon as new materials came out, the principal provided the money to acquire them. Over time, each department was able to build up review materials for every assessment subject. Teachers had ready access to sample problems and questions that they could use in their classrooms. Teachers even networked and exchanged standards-based materials with teachers from other districts because they realized that all were faced with the same challenge.

Supporting State Standards

Along with the new assessment system, New York state adopted learning standards that required the schools to make changes in their curricula. Teachers and administrators felt that the standards were overwhelming: "The content was in some cases more than a human being really could do" (District Representative). Since these standards were closely linked to the assessment system, additional pressure arose from the publicity and availability of school data. The media began comparing local scores with those statewide, and the community became more aware of how their students were performing. Teachers felt stressed by all the changes in curriculum and assessment. A teacher noted that "learning the [new] process was the biggest barrier" in making the middle school succeed (Teacher Survey).

Focusing on Curriculum

The teachers at JFK made a conscious decision to go with the new standards: "We can say we can't do it, and not do it. Or we can say we can do it, and then do it" (Teacher-a). The principal, in turn, made the teachers accountable for preparing the students well for the assessments. He identified teachers whose students did not perform well on tests and wanted to know what the teachers were going to do to address this situation.

Teachers described the districtwide summer workshop that was held to align the curriculum with the new standards as a critical incident to their change. Teachers appreciated that they did not have to be pulled out of their classrooms during the school year. They received stipends funded by the federal Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program to attend the voluntary workshop. The stipends helped bring the workshop participation rate close to 90 percent.

The curriculum workshop allowed teachers to get together and "hash out problems. . . . The effect of getting the teachers together is tremendous" (Teacher-b). Teachers in the workshop had to compare their class syllabi with the state standards for their subject area and show how their syllabi matched up with the standards. They addressed the issue from both directions: Did all elements of the syllabus line up with the standards? Do they teach all the standards? For example, teachers found that they taught materials outside the standards, or spent disproportionate time on marginal topics. Similarly, they found that they spent insufficient time on key state standards. Before spending five weeks on a thematic unit, teachers had to ensure that all other areas required by the standards were covered: "Here are 15 or 20 things that every eighth-grader is going to experience and you'd better do those . . . things" (District Representative). For some teachers, it was painful giving up favorite units. However, they learned that the curriculum standards did not preclude creative teaching styles and ideas.

During these summer workshops, teachers prepared sample units that were aligned to the standards. Using a unit writing guide, the teachers addressed questions such as: What are the objectives? What standards are addressed? What materials will be used? What are the students' previous knowledge or skills? What assessment is used to ensure mastery of knowledge? Sample units were posted on the districtwide website for teachers to access. Each department also provided a binder with all these units. Thus, the new standards "resulted in curriculum alignment vertically and horizontally [with] specifically defined skills/expectations per grade level" (Teacher Survey). Since the workshop was a districtwide enterprise, an alignment process across schools and their grade levels could also take place:

> Okay, here's where kids have got to be as seniors, where do they have to be as juniors, sophomores, freshman, eighth-graders, seventh-graders—so that there was continuity. And . . . the teachers were actually in a room with each other, talking with each other. And we did it for English, math, social studies, and science. So that we

> actually had an aligned curriculum that matched up with state standards, but was teacher-friendly. (District Representative)

One advantage of developing the curricula simultaneously was that each grade's curriculum was directly built on the previous grade's curriculum. Teachers made sure that there were few repetitions or gaps between grade levels. They were able to address the fact that many students entered middle school without having mastered the basics. The fifth-grade teachers agreed on a certain level of mastery and coverage of subject areas to better prepare the students for middle school. Similarly, middle school and high school teachers met to ensure that there was curricular continuity for the students' transition to high school. The teachers themselves developed the curriculum for each grade level, and this was then used as the districtwide instructional curriculum.

Following Through

Aligning the curriculum was not a one-step procedure, but an ongoing process. In the fall after the districtwide workshop, the principal ensured that the realignment process was continued throughout the school year. The district representative recalled that the principal made it clear that he wanted to see the learning standards "reflected in the activities [teachers] do with kids. . . . So when you combine that with what we did in the summer with our curriculum alignment, [it] matched up." There was some resistance to the implementation of the learning standards. Some teachers felt that the school leadership was autocratic; however, they realized that they did not have an option if they wanted to meet the demands of the state.

While the principal's expectations were high, they were tied to support. For example, the middle school expanded their part-time position of an Academic Intervention Services specialist to a full-time curriculum specialist position. Encouraging teachers to directly approach her for any assistance, the curriculum specialist helped teachers implement the new standards in the classroom. She taught sample lessons in classrooms to show new teaching styles. Similarly, the department leaders took the lead and pursued the new standards-based curriculum. They made sure that the teachers who were not able to participate in the districtwide alignment process got the materials and understood them. They held department meetings to refine the summer's alignment work on a schoolwide basis. At these department meetings, teachers gave feedback on whether they encountered problems and how the students responded to the standards. Teachers shared with their peers what worked and what did not work in their classrooms. They also continued the unit writing they started in the summer. Some teachers, for example, met to develop more units that reflected the standards, and, again, they collected these units in a binder for other teachers to use.

The ongoing curriculum work within departments ensured that the summer efforts were implemented. One teacher believes that these school-based efforts were "equally important as the alignment" (Teacher Focus Group). Over time, the state standards became a natural part of the planning and curriculum at JFK. A teacher stated,

> Now we're getting our students from the elementary school where they've been brought up with these standards. So it's more, every year it's more and more of a commonplace situation that they basically know what's expected. (Teacher Focus Group)

As a result of the staff's efforts, the students feel well prepared for the state test. A teacher recalls that her students said to her after the test: "Now we get it! Now we know why you made us do all that" (Teacher Focus Group). Retrospectively, a teacher expressed that standards "have driven the academic achievement to another level" (Teacher Survey).

Moving Forward

Teachers and administrators are ready to take their efforts to another level and address the developmental needs of students. "Even though, academically, things are where they need to be; in terms of social and emotional needs, they're aware that [step] needs to be taken" (District Representative). To take this next step, the middle school has applied for a grant that will provide funding for a summer workshop to focus on social and emotional needs and developmental timelines of middle school students. John F. Kennedy Middle School has managed to make tremendous improvements in student performance. By now focusing on the developing needs of students, the school will more closely follow a traditional middle school model.

Memorial Junior High School

Eagle Pass Independent School District

Eagle Pass, Texas

Memorial Junior High School

Eagle Pass, Texas

Eagle Pass, population 22,000, sits in the rolling, scrub brush–covered hills of Maverick County. The highway into town merges into Main Street, a nondescript four-lane road lined with small businesses, fast food restaurants, a supermarket, and a few hotels. On the other side of town is the international bridge that crosses over into Piedras Negras, Mexico, population 250,000.

North of Main Street are many older homes, as well as a substantial amount of new housing developments with large homes sitting close together on nicely manicured lawns and quiet streets. The other middle school in town, Eagle Pass Junior High School, is brand new and matches the affluent houses in this part of town. Although the staff, parents, and students of Memorial Junior High School consider the other middle school, Eagle Pass Junior High School to be the more affluent school in town, it has 95 percent of its students participating in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, the same percentage as that of Memorial.

The attendance boundary for Memorial Junior High lies south of Main Street. In this part of town, houses tend to be older. On any given block, nicely kept homes sit next door to ones that are run-down. Outside the city limits, but within the school's boundaries, the number of trailers and mobile homes increases. Only a few miles out of town are areas called *colonias*—land that originally had been colonized by squatters, or leased cheaply from the county until sufficient money had been paid to obtain ownership. In the colonias, roads are typically unpaved, and houses sit next to trailers that sit next to plywood shacks. Several of the houses appear to have been sheared in half because the owners could afford to build only one portion at a time. One student's house is missing an entire wall. An eighth-grade teacher describes some of the houses she has visited: "Many of them, in some instances, don't even have electricity. They borrow electricity from the neighbors, when they can. Some of them don't even have refrigerators in their home." One abandoned house has a cross in front of it; a student had recently died there during a gang-related beating (he was trying to get out of the gang). At the southern end of the school's boundary lies the Kickapoo Indian Reservation.

State Context

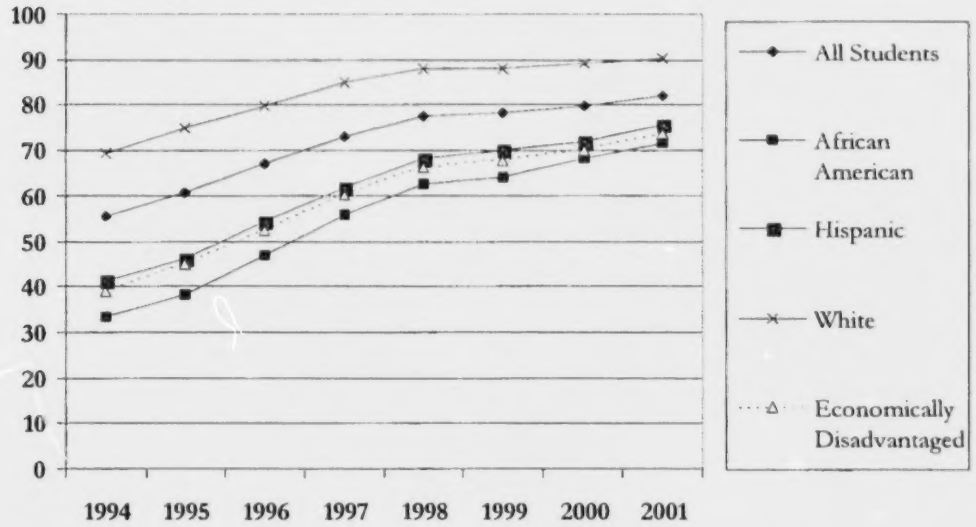
Texas has a high stakes accountability system in place, and uses the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) to assess the performance of students, schools, and districts. The TAAS has been aligned with the learning standards identified in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills curriculum guidelines. The TAAS has been in place and stable since 1993, and historical data is available on the Texas Education Agency website (*www.tea.state.tx.us*). Students are assessed in reading and mathematics annually in grades 3 through 8 and are given an exit exam in grade 10. Additionally, a writing examination is given in grades 4, 8, and 10. This exam consists of both a multiple choice and an open-ended portion. Students are required to pass the exit examination before graduating, and schools and districts are given an accountability rating of Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Low Performing based largely on the performance of students on the TAAS exams.[10]

Texas is one of the few states that currently presents student achievement data disaggregated by both race and income level, and the state has seen improvement on the TAAS for all student groups since 1994. Additionally, school and district accountability ratings are dependent not only on

[10] Student drop-out data are also taken into account.

overall achievement levels, but also on the achievement of separate groups of students that are based on race and income. Among other things, an Exemplary rating means that at least 90 percent of the students who took the TAAS passed all core subject areas—that is, reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, it means that at least 90 percent of each ethnic group and 90 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged passed each subject area test.

Figure 4: Percentage of All Texas Students Passing All Sections of the TAAS, Grades 3 through 8 and 10



Source: Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System

Texas is set to adopt a more rigorous exam during the 2002–03 school year. This exam will be called the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and will focus more heavily on higher-level skills.

School Demographics

The district has two junior high schools consisting of grades 7 and 8. Memorial Junior High had roughly 1,000 students in the 2000-01 school year. Ninety-seven percent were categorized as Hispanic. Student demographics have remained stable for the past decade except for the loss of 500 students in 1998 when the grade configurations of the district's schools were changed from 7–9 and 10–12 to the current configuration of 7–8, 9–10, and 11–12.

Table 8: Memorial Junior High School Student Demographics

Demographic Factors	2001–02
Hispanic	97%
Kickapoo Indian	2.5%
White	0.5%
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Participation	95%

Demographic Factors	2001–02
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	21%

Source: Memorial Junior High Attendance Data

Student Achievement

The school has shown tremendous academic growth over the past seven years, increasing by more than 120 percent the number of students passing all sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. The rate of growth has been roughly twice the rate of the state averages in writing and mathematics, and almost three times the state's average in reading. In addition, the school's average scores are at or above state average scores in all areas of the test. Just for the Kids, a nonprofit organization that tracks and evaluates high-performing schools, placed Memorial Junior High on its 2001 Honor Roll[11] because the school had shown academic excellence over a sustained period of time.

Table 9: Memorial Junior High School Eighth-Graders' Performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills

Year	Percentage passing: Reading		Percentage passing: Mathematics	
	School	State	School	State
1993–94	56	77	41	59
1994–95	62	76	50	57
1995–96	63	78	64	69
1996–97	67	84	71	76
1997–98	81	82	89	80
1998–99	85	88	89	86
1999–2000	86	90	92	90
2000–01	91	92	97	92
Growth	63%	20%	137%	56%

Source: Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System

Portrait of the School

Memorial Junior High is a one-story brick building shaped like a large letter T, with banana trees lining one side of the entrance. A sign above the main entrance states that people may be searched with a metal-detecting device. The school office, located just inside the front entrance, is walled with windows, making it possible to see into the office reception area and the principal's office. To the right of the main entrance is a large cafetorium (a space used as both a cafeteria and an auditorium) and to the left an immaculate hallway. The school is clean, colorful, and inviting. A variety of banners hang from the ceiling, including one celebrating the recent award by a state

[11] See the Texas Business and Education Coalition–Just for the Kids 2001 Honor Roll publication and the Just for the Kids website at www.just4kids.org.

organization that honors high-performing schools using best practices. On the walls are banners detailing the school's mission statement and exit criteria. Artistically painted on the "Wall of Fours" are the names of each eighth-grader who has scored at the top score on the state's writing assessment in each of the previous three years. Student work is tastefully and prominently displayed throughout the school.

Creating a Positive School Climate

A variety of interrelated factors contribute to the overall climate at Memorial. The attractive facilities help create a setting where a culture of support and caring can grow, and demonstrate to students that they are valued and their achievement is important. This ethic of care combines with a strong academic focus and safe surroundings to create an environment that contributes to student learning. The students and the staff demonstrate a strong sense of pride for their school, a pride that has spread to the students' families and to the general community.

Caring for One Another

Almost everyone uses the word "family" to describe the Memorial community. This sense of family is both figurative and literal. One teacher shares that "95 percent of the teachers are bilingual, so we can connect with the students. We've been graduates from Eagle Pass, the majority of us" (Teacher Focus Group). Several teachers have their own children attending the school. Many of the students have brothers, sisters, and cousins also at Memorial. Even though up to 90 percent of the students live far enough away from the school to be bused in, many members of the school community know each other outside of the school environment.

The sense of family is demonstrated in many ways. For instance, conversations are conducted with intimacy and respect, whether between administrators, teachers, custodians, or security staff; between adults and students; or among students. People make a point of knowing what is happening in each other's lives. They know about important and not-so-important events. They ask about each other's families. If a staff member reprimands a student for being tardy or for inappropriate behavior, he or she does so with love and kindness, frequently using intimate pronouns like "mi hija" or "mi hijo" (literally, "my daughter" or "my son"). Students, in turn, generally respond respectfully to these reprimands.

Focusing on Academics

While Memorial has established a caring community, it has done so in order to support its primary purpose: educating children. One science teacher says, "We're all working together for all of the kids. Not just one group working for this group, one group working for that one. It's everybody working for all of the kids." Teachers, administrators, counselors, and district personnel agree with this sentiment. Students are aware of this focus. One student shares how "the teachers—the teachers just . . . they work hard for you and they try to get you at top level" (Student Focus Group). Parents talk about the extra effort teachers put in and their dedication to student success. There are other indicators of this unwavering focus on the students. The band teacher explains, "We're busy. Most of the teachers are busy; you don't see a lot of teachers in the teacher's lounge." Principal Oscar Castillon shares how most of the "teachers stay after school and have their own tutorial programs, without getting paid." A teacher echoes this comment: "I'd tell [the students], you can come in and I'll be here for an hour or so if you need help with homework" (Language Arts Teacher-a).

One way that the school staff demonstrate their focus on academic achievement is through their display of banners, trophies, and other awards that students have received for excellent work.

Where most schools have cases of trophies to recognize athletic achievement, Memorial also has cases of trophies recognizing the academic achievements of students, in addition to the banners of commendation. Student work is displayed on colorful bulletin boards in every wing of the building.

Fostering a Safe Environment

There is rarely a moment during the day when there are not several adults visible. When the students are in the hallways, teachers are in their classroom doorways; custodians are spread throughout the school; the four security guards, two police officers, and the probation officer mix with the students; and assorted administrative staff are out of their offices. All of these adults quietly talk to individual students and groups of students, most of the time in English, but sometimes in Spanish: "Hurry up, students"; "Let's go, guys; come on, ladies"; "Do you have permission to go to your locker?"; "Vamos, vamos, apurense." Clearly, this adult presence helps keep order, but the students also do their part. They move quickly and with purpose. They talk like typical middle school–age kids, but they are seldom too loud and there is little horsing around. They interact with the adults in a way that makes the transitions both a way to move from one place to another and a way to build relationships.

This proud, achievement-oriented, and safe atmosphere is at odds with the school's reputation. It has been, and still is, known as the "bad school on the bad side of town" (Language Arts Teacher-c). Several parents shared the misgivings and fear they had felt before their children enrolled in the school. After their children began attending Memorial, these worries disappeared, and the students and their parents realized that the school's reputation was unfounded. One parent agrees with her son's sentiment that the school was not what they expected. Teachers voice their delight at being able to work at Memorial. Students describe their appreciation of the educational aspects of the school, but they also express their appreciation for feeling safe. Students describe the security guards as members of the school family. One student shares how the "security guards know what's going on because they're out there with us. They're also like our teachers; they're always around us" (Student Focus Group). Another explains how

> you know that there's the securities here, that if anything happens they're here. They're here in our lunch. They're here all the time. So it's . . . you know that if something does occur, that nothing bad will really happen 'cause they're watching. (Student Focus Group)

Indeed, while in some schools security personnel seem to be looking for student misbehavior and are often avoided by students, at Memorial the security personnel are casual and easy-going, and students appear to be as comfortable with them as they are with other adults in the school.

Valuing School Pride

The facilities are the first indication of the pride that exists at Memorial, and the people of the school community strengthen this impression. At the annual holiday band concert, pride shows in the faces of the five or six hundred people who attend: band directors; students in the jazz, orchestra, and mariachi groups; parents; extended family members; community members; school staff; and the students who come to watch.

The school rejoices often. They held a rally to celebrate the Just for the Kids award. One of the band teachers describes how they have pep rallies to get everyone excited about taking the state assessment, and then another rally to celebrate their successes when the scores come in. Counselors circulate among the classrooms to formally present monthly awards to students who have done well academically and have been friendly, helpful, and responsible members of the school community.

Students are nominated by teachers to receive these awards. This process not only recognizes academic achievement, but also rewards the behaviors that the school values.

The previous art teacher (who has moved to the high school) had volunteered his time to paint the Wall of Fours, and the staff wanted to keep up this tradition. During the department head meeting, the principal explains that they will have to find a way to raise the money to pay a local sign-painting business $1,500 to paint the names of so many successful students. To reinforce the value of this expenditure, the principal relates seeing families who have come to the band concert pointing out to each other their children's names permanently painted on the wall in recognition of their achievement.

Structuring the School

Memorial's staff are unhesitant in their identification of the most significant factors in the school's success: interdisciplinary teaming and block scheduling. The two systems were implemented at different points in the school's history, and it took time and considerable effort to make them work together. The school has now reached a point where interdisciplinary teams and block schedules have melded into a single, harmonious system.

Implementing Teaming

At Memorial, each grade level occupies its own wing and consists of four teams. There are two hallways in each wing, and two teams on each hallway. Proudly displayed at the entrance to each hallway are the names of the two teams that reside there, along with large emblems of the university mascots. One hall houses the Rice Owls alongside the Texas Lutheran University Bulldogs. Another has the Princeton Tigers and the University of Texas Longhorns. The team names represent the colleges and universities from which the teachers, administrators, and some former students at the school have received their degrees. This choice of team names gives students an opportunity to see themselves attending a postsecondary institution, and also identifies visible role models—people from their own community who have successfully completed the course of study at a postsecondary institution.

There are roughly 120 students per team. Each team is staffed with a teacher for each core subject (mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies) and an instructional aide. Responding to student needs and low test scores, the school hired an extra language arts and mathematics teacher for each seventh-grade team to give students more individual attention. A counselor explains, "The low student–teacher ratio is paramount as far as being more effective in the classroom. . . . When they come in from elementary, I think they need more preparation."

Extending Class Time

Memorial uses a system that includes two schedules called A/B and C. The C schedule consists of eight 50-minute periods and is used only for the first few days of school and during whole-school testing periods. Each A or B day consists of four one-and-one-half-hour blocks of time and a 40-minute lunch period. Students have one block each of language arts and mathematics every day; they take science and one elective on A-schedule days, and social studies and a second elective on B-schedule days

Teachers teach three blocks each day and have one free block. On A-schedule days, the free block is used as a planning period. On B-schedule days, the free block is used for team conference periods. Thus, every other day teachers get a one-and-one-half-hour block of time for planning their own classroom teaching activities, and a one-and-one-half-hour block of time for team conference periods. According to the principal,

within the team conference period they do most of the team planning. They go over their lessons and see how they're going to tie them together if they have to. They do any modifications that they have to at that time. They visit with parents.

Benefits of Interdisciplinary Teaming and Block Scheduling

The interdisciplinary teaming combined with the block scheduling has an effect on most aspects of life at Memorial. Some of these effects are obvious and their genesis easy to describe. Others, however, are more subtle and the ties to the organizational design harder to identify.

Focusing on instruction

Block scheduling and teaming improves instruction in several ways. First, the core (non-elective) teachers feel that the 90-minute blocks of uninterrupted instruction help them teach better. The principal explains how delighted the science teachers are because they can start an experiment and finish it the same day. A mathematics teacher's lessons now include reviews of previous assignments, warm-up activities, conversations to tie into the next unit, a guided lesson, time for students to work individually or in groups, question and answer segments, and time for the teacher to work individually with students. These teachers have invested considerable effort in ensuring that they use the increased class time effectively. They are not just taking longer to teach in the same way they have previously. Rather, they thoughtfully include classroom activities designed to ensure that students are learning, such as review of those parts of assignments that students are struggling with; more discussion of the subject matter; and more individual time devoted to all students, especially those who are struggling.

The common planning time also allows for collaboration and for the integration and alignment of curriculum. One teacher explains,

> We try to pretty much work to where we're all doing the same thing. And this is also an excellent time, because we get to share ideas. And if something worked for me, and I thought it was great, then I get to share it with the rest of the teachers. And the same thing goes for them. If they presented a lesson and it worked out really great for them and the kids were able to understand it and do well with it, then we incorporate it into ours. (Language Arts Teacher-b)

Further, teaming ensures that each student's academic performance is understood thoroughly by a small group of teachers. Because these teachers meet regularly, they are able to discuss individual students. One teacher explains how this helps the team focus on each student's needs:

> We see a different side of students. I may have someone who's not comfortable with science and I cannot get that child to perform at all. You know, we'll go sit down and I'll find out that they're awesome in [another subject area]. It's usually, if they're not good in science, it's the language arts where they excel. And they'll show me examples and I'll think, oh, this child can write? I didn't even know they could write. Because they won't for me but they will for their language arts. So you get to see different sides of the students. (Teacher Focus Group)

These team conference periods make it virtually impossible for any student to slip through the safety net. Teachers are able to determine if students are having difficulty in more than one class. Problems are identified quickly so that teachers can attempt to intercede before it becomes clear that a student is not going to pass.

Finally, competition between the teams motivates both the teachers and the students. A teacher shares that "it's what affects our scores mostly, that there's a friendly competition between the teams. We always want to be in first! And our kids always have that competition" (Teacher Focus Group). Teams compete on a variety of fronts, including motivation and spirit, lunchtime intramural sports, six-week test scores, and yearly state assessment scores. Teachers point out, however, that they carefully monitor the use of competition. They say that they have been emphasizing that all of the team members also belong to the larger team of Memorial. This emphasis is the result of learning that some students were becoming dissatisfied with their own teams and wanted to move to another team.

Building relationships

Teaming and block scheduling greatly enhance the relationships between teachers and students, but they also help students establish healthy relationships with each other, and allow teachers to bond with other teachers, with the administration, and with parents.

Instead of being one person in a thousand, students interact with a smaller group which helps them create friendships and fosters respect. In the words of a science teacher: "[Teams] helped create a culture of caring and inclusion for the students: They have their little team family of those five or six teachers that basically take them in under their wing and are caring for them."

Teachers speak of one another in warm and caring ways. A language arts teacher explains how the teams are not only safe havens where teachers work together, but also where they support each other. One teacher describes how deeply they care about each other:

> And I think that it's not only work—I think we've become a family, and if we have a major personal problem or anything, they're willing to listen. There's always that smile, that pat on the back, and "Keep on going." And if you do something positive, they know. So it's like a family—you know that they're there for you. It doesn't have to be only school materials—it's also personally. (Teacher Focus Group)

Not only do teachers on each team form close ties with each other, but with other members of the staff who attend team meetings. These small group interactions with the instructional lead teacher, counselors, and the principal create an environment that allows for direct communication.

In the focus groups, both teachers and parents talk about the benefits of being able to meet together as a group. If parents are not able to come in to the school, the team visits the parents at home or at their workplace. One team challenges itself to make visits to the homes of every student on their team during their planning periods. These visits help teachers develop a warm rapport with the parents, and by posting pictures of the visits they have made, they have encouraged other students to ask teachers to visit their homes also.

Communicating effectively

Teachers are well informed at Memorial. Not only do they know what the other members of their teams are doing in each of their classrooms (even though these teachers may be teaching other subject areas), but they are aware of what teachers are doing on the other teams in either grade. Also, they are well informed about school and district business. The foundation of this communication network is the team meeting. The school's instructional officer[12] often attends these meetings and, at

[12] A more common term is *curriculum lead teacher*. This person is the school's principal instructional leader, performing a variety of duties including teacher training, curricular decisions, mentoring, monitoring the state assessments, and attending a variety of training. Each campus within the district has an instructional officer.

times, so do the principal and the counselors. Teachers also meet with their academic departments at least once a month (these meetings sometimes occur after school); department heads meet weekly with the principal and the instructional officer. The principal and the instructional officer meet often with district representatives. Additionally, there are monthly districtwide vertical meetings focused around each curricular area so teachers are well informed about instruction in their content area throughout the twelve grades.

Because of the extensive communication provided through this network, faculty meetings occur only when necessary and are conducted in the morning before classes begin. Faculty and team leader meetings have a business-like atmosphere that underscores the importance everyone places on being informed. Participants come to meetings having already discussed the issues, and this enables quicker decisions and shorter meetings. This culture of communication makes it clear that each group (teachers, staff, administrators, district personnel) know enough about each other's domains to trust that appropriate decisions are being made at each level.

Sharing decision making

There is little evidence of any power struggles between the school and the district. The people at each level perform the duties that they have the most control over, and provide input and assistance to the other groups as needed. The district Title I coordinator explains how "everything is pretty well campus-based. We help them but we don't make major decisions." The principal stresses that the teachers are free to make their own instructional decisions, but "if you need help, I'm going to provide you the help." He feels that his primary duty is to "see that the teachers have the space to teach, free of interruption." A teacher uses some of the same words to describe this approach:

> [Administration's] philosophy is . . . "Let the teachers teach. If they're being successful in their classrooms, let them do what they're doing. . . . We know that when we have a problem, we have a suggestion or anything, we can always call on them. . . . We don't need them to be in our classroom every single day to monitor what we're doing." Because I think they already know what we're doing in the classroom. (Teacher Focus Group)

The district Title I coordinator explains how the campus makes almost all of the decisions concerning the use of resources, including budgeting and training. She describes how "their staff development . . . is more focused to their needs . . . [since] they develop their [own] plans." The teachers and the principal outline a wide variety of areas where decisions are made at the appropriate level. Teachers make most curricular decisions, providing extensive input into the selection of textbooks, interacting with students and parents, choosing who they want to team with and what team certain students should be on, and determining how to most effectively reach the students. Teachers also make key decisions about how to best structure the teaming and block scheduling system. For example, teachers decided to do away with a 35-minute advisory period that they thought was ineffective. Many decisions such as resource management issues, personnel issues, and campus planning are made in the team leader meetings and the Site Based Decision Making team meetings—which include the principal and staff, parent, and community and business representatives. It is important to stress that, although each group makes independent decisions, they each communicate necessary information and solicit advice from each other.

It is difficult to portray how important the shared decision making is to the success of the school. Certainly, time is saved and resources are used more effectively. More important though, is the sense of efficacy, control, and professionalism that is expressed through both language and daily activities. One teacher explained that she felt empowered when the teaming model was put in place:

> I guess you could say it was kind of like magic. Because we didn't have to depend on administration anymore. And it seemed like the teacher had control now. We had a say-so; we had a voice. And we could express that opinion, that voice that we had. (Language Arts Teacher-b)

Meeting with students and parents

Principal Castillon contrasts Memorial's situation with that of other schools he has seen, where the principal's primary contacts with parents are discussions of discipline issues. He feels that teaming has made his job easier. A language arts teacher explains why:

> Before we didn't have team teaching and teachers were pretty much on their own, you know? If we had discipline problems, we had to rely on the principal or the assistant principal and at times they were busy and the kid was sent back to the classroom and so the problem was not solved.

This sentiment is shared by a science teacher: "We have our parent conferences with the students. We try to take care of things before they escalate to sending them to the office. You know, if we use the office, that is the last resort." Parents agree with these statements and add that they appreciate interacting with a small group of teachers, all of whom are very familiar with their child.

Valuing respect

Historically, Memorial has had many discipline problems, including gang-related issues. Over the years, discipline problems have decreased as each team and grade level implemented first the teaming and then the block scheduling model. These approaches have allowed teachers to foster respectful interactions with students. With this structure now firmly in place, discipline problems continue to decline. In a recent six-week period, there were seven discipline reports, as compared to 40 or 50 during the same period last year. A mathematics teacher explains that if he refers one student to the counselor for discipline problems a month, that is "way too many." A language arts teacher feels that teaming has "really curbed the gang members" by creating a sense of belonging that allows students to build close relationships with many adults. Because of the closeness of the teams, teachers "knew how [students] behaved in all of their classes. I knew if they misbehaved in mine and they didn't in another" (Teacher Focus Group).

Some of the explanations for the improved discipline are obvious. One teacher explains that "the block schedule has helped a lot, also, with the discipline and tardies, because the kids are not out in the hall as much as if they would be changing classes six, seven times" (Science Teacher). In addition, since the teams are housed together, the students do not have far to travel between one class and the next. Students are seated and ready to go when class begins. Transitions are fairly calm and relaxed. The band teacher explains why this might be: "I don't know if you have noticed or not, but we don't use bells. . . . It's kind of like, everybody knows where they're supposed to be, where they're supposed to go." The teams also help in two other important logistical ways. First, each team has its own color for hall passes. This makes it easy for the staff to spot a student who is in an area of the school where he or she does not belong. Second, student movements can be controlled by having them migrate in teams. Students are called for assemblies by groups: "The Bulldogs may now proceed to the cafetorium." After a few minutes, the next team is called, and so on.

Building resources

The localized decision making enabled by the team model creates an infrastructure for sharing of resources and efficient and appropriate use of resources. At the district level, money and resources from a variety of sources (federal and state monies and a few grants) are managed to

ensure that there are no overlaps, but the majority of the decisions about how to use the money are made at the campus level. The district Title I coordinator explains, "The funds are campus specific and they go into each individual plan at the campuses. They use the funds to meet the intent and purpose of the programs, but in various ways." She also explains that the schoolwide distribution of Title I funds (instead of targeting only identified students) gives the school the flexibility to affect the greatest number of students.

Decisions made at the team level affect how resources are used in three ways: what personnel are hired and how they are distributed, what professional development the staff attends, and how resources are shared. Funds are often used to increase the number of teachers in one given area—for example, by doubling the number of teachers teaching language arts in the seventh grade. The instructional aides helped in a variety of ways, such as one-on-one work with students who need extra help. The teams work together to determine which teachers will need assistance for a special project or what can be done to help the whole team. The aides also work one-on-one with students who need extra help.

With teaming comes a common voice. One teacher shared how some professional development in the past was repetitive, with the same presenter year after year and forced attendance. The district listened when teachers cried, "Enough is enough," and now teachers are asked, "What kind of inservice would you like to have? What kind of topics would you like covered?" (Language Arts Teacher-b). The teams work together with the instructional officer to decide on what training they need to increase overall team effectiveness.

Attending to all Students

Memorial displays several characteristics that help support students and ensure success for the whole school population. Memorial's commitment to empowering all students is reflected in the processes they have in place to meet a variety of student needs: those who need a little extra help on particular assignments, those who are at risk of failing a class, migrant students who missed a portion of the school year, and those with other special needs.

Teachers at the school express a willingness to provide extra help to struggling students, both during regular class time and outside of the normal school day. Students, teachers, administrators, and parents all speak of the teachers' dedication and commitment to student learning. One student shares how "maybe you're just the only one in your class who didn't get it, so that's why they'll make a special time after school to make sure you understand it" (Student Focus Group). When students are identified by the team as needing more individualized attention, teachers discuss which teacher will have the time to work with them before or after school. Several teachers offer daily morning sessions for those students who arrive early.

Students who need more support than the tutoring sessions have other avenues for help, including working one-on-one with instructional aides, talking to counselors, changing their learning environment by moving to another classroom, and attending Saturday test-preparation and tutoring sessions. The Saturday sessions replaced the traditional summer sessions for struggling students, with the goal of getting them help as soon as a need was identified rather than waiting until they had failed at the end of the year.

Nineteen percent of Memorial's student population is classified as migrant. These students are served by a federally funded Migrant Education Program.[13] Students who have missed school

[13] The Migrant Education Program (MEP) is authorized under Part C of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended. It helps ensure that migrant children access and benefit from both basic school services and current education reform and school improvement initiatives. For more information see http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/MEP/programs.html.

because they travel with their parents as they work in agriculture can attend extra one-hour sessions four days per week. Assignments are created specifically to give each student the instruction necessary to be on par with his or her classmates.

The school has a variety of ways to serve students with special needs. Students with severe mental retardation have a self-contained, life skills classroom where they learn academics and work on social and living skills. All other students with special needs are served by full inclusion in general education classrooms. One teacher explains how the teaming works particularly well for these students:

> Back then [before full inclusion] they were like, "I'm special ed!" But now they won't say special ed; [they say,] "I'm on the Longhorn team now." They take pride, and it's good to see that they feel that they belong to somebody, just like everybody else. (Teacher Focus Group)

This teacher notes that Memorial has a policy of trying to get everyone to take the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). This is exceptional because the Texas accountability system is based in part on student performance on the TAAS. If a school has low student performance, the school's accountability rating will drop. Texas allows schools to exempt certain students in special education from taking the TAAS, which often helps schools to maintain higher student performance ratings. Memorial staff try hard to prepare all students for the test, including those in special education. The school consistently has 93 percent of all students taking the tests. In the teacher's words: "And most of all . . . seeing [the special education students] taking the TAAS and passing—getting 3s and 4s on the writing. I mean, that's . . . excellent. . . . I'm really proud of them."

The staff at Memorial also focus on readying students for more challenging course work. Twenty-one percent of Memorial's students are enrolled in Pre-Advanced Placement classes in language arts, science, social studies, and mathematics in both the seventh and eighth grades. Additionally, an Integrated Physics and Chemistry science class is offered to eighth-graders. The 20 or so students in the Algebra I class each year take the end-of-course exam (with over 95% percent passing rate the last three years). Students in other Pre-AP classes do not take end-of-course exams, but they will be on the AP track when they reach high school.

Using Data to Drive Instruction

The staff at Memorial use data to make instructional decisions from the moment students enter the school. Teachers analyze past performance on the state-mandated tests to identify students who might need additional support: "As a matter of fact, in this school, we have had Saturday programs for TAAS tutorial, for those kids that did not pass the TAAS in the sixth grade" (Mathematics Teacher). Memorial also gives students school-created pre- and post-tests, allowing teachers to measure their progress. The mathematics teacher notes that generally, "we see a really big difference" in their pre- and post-test scores.

Students are given a variety of assessments during each six-week period. Some of these are formatted like the TAAS test, which enables the instructional officer to do item analyses on individual students' scores to provide direction for the teachers to re-teach certain objectives. The teams meet to discuss student progress, and, when necessary, talk with students to get as much information as possible before making a decision:

> We bring the kids in, we try to talk to them about what's going on: "Were you just not focused this six weeks? What's going on at home? Is there something going on

> here at school that we can help you with or are you not understanding the way we're presenting the material to you? What can we do for you?" And we . . . monitor their progress. If their progress doesn't get any better, then we bring the parent in. (Science Teacher)

This focus on student performance data leads to important instructional changes. For example, after the mathematics teachers implemented mathematics blocks every day (instead of every other day), they saw a sharp increase in mathematics scores on assessments. Accordingly, the language arts teachers implemented daily blocks for their courses.

Investing in Teachers

Memorial's success has not occurred by chance. One thing that has contributed to their success is the staff's strong appreciation for continued learning. As a campus, staff attend a large number of professional development activities, averaging roughly eight sessions per teacher per school year (Memorial teacher training document). In addition, they have an informal but well connected network between staff members to share information. Finally, new teachers are socialized into the Memorial philosophy by formal and informal mentoring.

Training Teachers

A language arts teacher at the school explains how Memorial generally has more staff at district trainings than any other campus. Teachers' requests for training are usually granted, and it is often a problem because too many teachers want to attend a particular class. A teacher shares a possible explanation for this enthusiasm by describing the power teachers have in choosing their own training:

> Every department gets to voice opinions, and I think that has worked a lot better because we are getting inservices that help us with our core courses, and we don't have to sit through these boring inservices where you really, you know, you just kind of doodle throughout and not learn very much and just waste your time. (Language Arts Teacher-b)

The list of training that the staff has attended supports this statement. Teachers and staff attend a wide selection of inservices, conferences, and curriculum development sessions. To help teachers use the teaming and block scheduling system to its fullest, almost all of the staff have attended a Texas Middle School Conference where numerous workshops and seminars on teaming are presented. Teachers working with special populations attend gifted and talented, English as a Second Language certification, special education, and bilingual trainings, some of which emphasize working with the students who are members of the Kickapoo Indian tribe.

Collaborating on Teaching

The formal professional development affects the teaching practices used at the school. The principal explains, "You can see it. You can see it in their lesson plans; you can see it in their classrooms." But these trainings explain only a portion of the collective knowledge that exists at Memorial. Equally as important is the sharing of knowledge that is part of everyday life at the school. The ex-principal phrases it nicely: "We're having staff development on a daily basis."

Sometimes this sharing is very low key, entailing placing reading material in the teachers' mailboxes (Language Arts Teacher-b). At other times, training occurs with small groups of teachers during the day. When a language arts teacher's students achieved high ratings on the state

achievement tests, the instructional officer asked her to present an informal inservice to the other language arts teachers. Oftentimes staff members return from training and make changes in their classrooms. If these changes are successful, teachers share because "if it works for me, I want it to work for everybody" (Principal). Additionally, the teachers' enthusiasm helps influence campus and district decisions about what inservices should be taught on a wider scale: "Look, this is what I've seen. . . . And this looks really innovative, this looks really good. And they will support it. They'll do it right away. . . . They'll get the training" (Language Arts Teacher-a).

Integrating New Teachers

Logistical know-how, curriculum knowledge, and campus culture are generally transmitted through teacher mentoring. The principal partners each new teacher with one or more experienced Memorial teachers. The teaming model facilitates this partnership because of both physical proximity and the luxury of common planning periods. Teachers are able to plan together, but they are also able to visit each other's classrooms to observe one another in action. The department heads are also instrumental in the training of teachers. They provide curricular direction, but also observe teachers upon request, and, if a teacher asks, teach a lesson so that the new teachers can observe them.

The instructional officer is clearly the main force behind this in-house teacher support system. As one teacher puts it, "She pretty much keeps us going" (Language Arts Teacher-c). She is very involved with the curriculum—identifying training opportunities, acquiring materials and other resources, attending department and team meetings, and, in general, doing everything she can to help the teachers be successful.

Story of Change

Presently, Memorial is being recognized for the positive gains the students are making academically. This had not always been the case. In the past, Memorial was known more for the problems it had with keeping discipline. The school was making the news because of the frequency of assaults and fights. If the seventh grade decorated their halls, the older students would pass by and destroy the walls in a matter of minutes. The attitude of the time was that "everything that you could fix, you could fix through discipline" (Ex-principal). Teachers followed a prescribed set of instructions for particular infractions that invariably ended up sending a student to the office. Because so much attention was focused on discipline, teaching was difficult. Teachers would follow the curriculum as best they could, which generally entailed teaching "lesson by lesson from the book," and if you finished the book, you had done your job (Mathematics Teacher). The other measure of success described was "if you had discipline in the classroom, you're okay" (Language Arts Teacher-c). Learning was further hampered by short class periods, large class sizes, and the large number of students each teacher was responsible for teaching.

There was little communication or support among the teachers. New teachers were given some materials and a teacher's edition of the text, and left alone. In addition to discontent among the teachers, there was a general attitude of "always blaming things on the children" (Ex-principal) because they were poor or could not speak English, or they were recent immigrants or came from single-parent households.

Leading with Purpose

Memorial's turnaround was due in large part to Ana Gonzalez, the school's previous principal. She describes the move from teaching at the local high school to Memorial in 1990 as "devastating! The worst experience of my whole educational life!" But looking back at the changes

that she helped put in place, she says, "What I did at that school has been the greatest accomplishment of my life."

The very crisis that Memorial was experiencing in terms of its discipline problems and low academic performance was what inspired the principal to envision something better. To make this vision become a reality, she became a workaholic and in turn demanded hard work from her staff. When describing the principal, teachers talked about how exacting and uncompromising she was, but they always spoke of her with respect. According to one staff member, the principal "felt inside of her that it was going to work, and she was going to do whatever it took. And she believed in it so strongly that nobody was going to get in her way! She was focused" (Instructional Officer).

As principal, she provided the single-minded focus necessary to start the school moving in a new direction. When Oscar Castillon, one of Ms. Gonzalez's assistant principals, became principal in 1996, he built upon this foundation to keep the school moving forward. The instructional officer described him as much more relaxed than Ms. Gonzalez, but his quiet style of leadership was effective in creating a common vision and a strong sense of purpose for the whole school community. His philosophy of ensuring that teachers had the "space to teach" gave teachers responsibility for their jobs and also made the students take more responsibility for their own learning.

Transforming the Climate

Upon arriving at the school, the principal's first order of business was to change the expectations the staff had for students. She believed all students were capable of learning, and that it was important to be respectful of what they brought with them from home. She had no patience for staff who tried to use a student's home life as an excuse for poor performance. As she explained,

> Don't come and tell me that this is a poor Mexican child and he comes from the barrio and everything. No, no, no. . . . We have absolutely no jurisdiction over [him] while he's at home! [When] he crosses that street and he gets in here—what are we doing about that child?

She also worked with staff to change their thinking about performance. She explained to the staff that student grades on report cards were a poor indicator of student knowledge and growth or of teacher effectiveness. She told the staff, "To me, grades are unimportant. To me, learning is important." Instead of grades, the staff had to find ways to demonstrate student progress by "bringing this child from here all the way up here" (Ana Gonzalez). She also raised questions as to why certain processes were in place. When she first arrived, the students were kept behind the school in the morning where they would mill around and occasionally break windows. When she was told that that was how it had always been, and that there was no particularly good reason, she made a decision that was unpopular with some of the staff: to allow the students to enter the building through any of the entrances. Reducing the number of students entering through any one entrance helped calm the morning routine and stopped the breaking of windows. Coincidentally, that year the district created a closed-campus policy (students remained on campus the whole school day) and a dress policy, which also helped keep students calmer.

Changing the Organizational Structure

Changes in school climate were important to the improvement of the school, but Principal Gonzalez was looking for a way to create more dramatic increases in student performance. She became aware of the teaming model through reading research and having conversations with teachers who had worked in middle schools in other districts. With district support, she visited

schools in Texas that were using the model and spoke with a variety of experts in the field. Convinced that the model would be effective at Memorial, she began educating the teachers about it and putting processes into place to change the school's organizational structure.

At the end of her first year, the principal surveyed the teachers to find who would be willing to begin interdisciplinary teaming. She wanted only the people who were willing to make a change. A small group of seventh-grade teachers were intrigued by the concept and agreed to participate in a pilot. That year, the group visited several schools in Texas that were using teaming and were impressed with what they saw.

Teachers from other districts also came to Memorial to share their stories, and a variety of other professional development activities were provided. One wing of the school building was allocated for the pilot team. A teacher explained that the first year was difficult, especially learning to "listen to five different opinions and not leave the team planning period very upset [with] each other." Many teachers shared the same reservations, but the successes of the one seventh-grade team were hard to ignore:

> There [were] a lot of teachers that were not really interested in going into the team. It was something new and it [was] something that they [weren't sure would] work or not. So they were kind of leery of saying yes. But once they saw how it curtailed discipline and attendance went up, . . . everybody started to have a different opinion [about] it. (Principal)

The next time Principal Gonzalez asked who wanted to use the model, the rest of the seventh-grade teachers and the eighth-grade teachers were convinced. That summer, a large group of teachers attended a middle school conference. According to a mathematics teacher, the conference enabled them to learn the "dos and don'ts" of teaming, gave them exposure to teachers using the model, and provided them a rich trove of resources and processes to allow them to extract what they would need for their particular circumstances. In addition to the conference, the principal had teachers read books written by "pioneers" in the field[14] and then brought the authors in for staff development. A counselor remembers the objective to "bring in as many presenters as possible. And not just local presenters, but from all across the country. They spent a lot of money bringing in excellent presenters."

The eventual success of the teaming model was also due to the staged implementation. The seventh-grade pilot group was able to mentor the rest of the seventh-grade teachers and the eighth-grade teachers the following year. These teachers in turn were able to help the ninth-grade teachers implement the model the year after that. (This change took place before the district restructured the schools into their current grades 7–8, 9–10, and 11–12 configuration.)

The teaming model provided a climate that nurtured the creation of the block schedule. One teacher explained how they could borrow time from each other: "If I had a project and I needed the students to stay two [periods], I would talk with another teacher and make arrangements" (Teacher Focus Group). At the same time, the team and the principal were looking for ways to address the poor mathematics scores ("our big monster," according to Ms. Gonzalez) in grade 9. They came up with a plan to have the students take two mathematics classes a day. The gains in mathematics

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[14] Two authors that Ms. Gonzalez brought to the school were John Lounsbury and Elliot Merenbloom. Books by Lounsbury that staff read included two National Middle Association publications: *As I See It* (1991) and *Perspectives: Middle School Education, 1964–1984* (1984). Books by Merenbloom also included publications from the National Middle School Association: *Developing Effective Middle Schools Through Faculty Participation,*. second edition (1988) and *The Team Process in the Middle School: A Handbook for Teachers* (1991).

scores, along with the informal block scheduling that was already going on, convinced the ninth-grade team to go to a full block scheduling model. As with the teaming, success caught on:

> So we started [the block scheduling] with the ninth-graders. . . . And some of the teachers [had been] very, very happy about their schedules [and didn't want to change]. And I said, "Oh no, I don't think we can be with the kids an hour and a half, you know, 45 minutes is more than enough. And now I don't think I can go back." (Teacher Focus Group)

The final structural change that was essential to Memorial's turnaround was the movement of the ninth-graders to the new high school for grades 9 and 10 in 1998. Naturally, losing 500 students created an immediate change. Halls were less crowded and noise levels went down. There was also more uniformity in the student population. A science teacher remembers how intimidated the seventh-graders were by both the size and the maturity of the ninth-graders. With the ninth-graders gone, the transition was much easier for new students coming into the school, and teachers noticed a change in the behavior of the remaining students.

Focusing on Curriculum and Instruction

Climatic and structural modifications were important changes in and of themselves, and they had an impact on student achievement. But three other factors were critical Memorial's efforts to better serve the students: targeted professional development, the use of the Accelerated Reader® computer-based reading program, and the creation of the instructional officer position.

Training the teachers in the use of block scheduling and teaming greatly facilitated the introduction of those models. Campuswide programs, like the New Jersey Writing Project, helped the campus align around instructional methods and provided consistency across programs for the students. Content area training improved teachers' knowledge in their area of specialization and provided them with up-to-date instructional methodology. Teachers also took course work at nearby colleges to gain special certifications. For example, the language arts teachers worked to become certified in ESL instruction, and teachers who had not yet passed the state's teacher competency examination did so.

Principal Gonzalez wanted teachers to focus on improving students' reading abilities, so the staff put a variety of processes into place for improving reading instruction. For example, to double the amount of time that students spent reading a book in school each day, the mathematics, science, social studies, or elective teachers would devote one period a week to reading. Even with this increased emphasis, she was frustrated with the slow increase in reading skills. She looked for ways to increase the amount of time students spent reading and to emphasize comprehension. She used Title I funds to purchase a computer-based reading program called Accelerated Reader, books for the library, rewards for the students, and a networked computer for each of the reading classrooms. This focus on reading instruction and repeated skill assessments became very intense, but it paid off. According to one language arts teacher, "We can attribute a lot of our success now to the Accelerated Reader program" (Language Arts Teacher-c).

The principal convinced the district that instead of hiring an assistant principal, they should hire a person dedicated to curriculum and instruction. She was able to hire an instructional officer who brought energy and conviction to the school. He served as a mentor to many of the teachers. He helped secure resources, set up in-house and out-of-town professional development, and wrote curriculum. In short, he did what he could to support the teachers.

Building Consensus

Upon her arrival at the school, she mandated a no-excuses attitude for student learning. She believed that a "boss" was necessary and that the staff would respond to a committed instructional leader. Her impression of some of the staff members was that they were working to please themselves instead of helping the students. She challenged this attitude in many ways, even walking unannounced into teachers' classrooms to demonstrate teaching techniques that would help the students learn. Along with high expectations, she talked often of the benefits of change, and about the kind of staff Memorial would need: "She asked us if we were willing to make changes. . . . We had to drastically change our thinking. If anybody was not willing to do that, [he or she was] asked to ask for a transfer to another school" (Teacher Focus Group).

Many of the staff did leave. By the principal's estimate, roughly 25 percent of the staff left over the five years that she was there. She explained that she had to work with people outside of the school to have some of these teachers moved. Others left because they were long-time teachers and change was difficult for them. A counselor explained that it was not uncommon to hear these teachers explain: "I've been doing this for 20 years, I know how to teach and some of my students are in college and are successful." The counselor went on to say she heard "a thousand and one excuses because they don't want to change." Some left because they just could not "handle the heat" (Instructional Officer).

Those who stayed varied in their commitment to change. Most of the teachers understood that there were some teachers who were not doing their jobs and had to go. Some took a wait-and-see attitude. A few that stayed resisted change, but eventually bought into the changes that were being made. For example, a teacher who left for maternity leave before the teaming was in place and returned to work on a team shared her story:

> And so, when I came back it was very easy for me to just kind of flow and blend in with what was happening. And it changed my mind. I had been one of the ones thinking it wouldn't work and it was going to be difficult and there were going to be very many challenges to face. And I didn't know how we were going to solve problems with parents . . . but it worked totally opposite of that. (Language Arts Teacher-b)

The principal emphasized that the turnaround succeeded because of the teachers who remained and the new staff hired during that period. These teachers were more receptive to change, but she understood from the visiting experts' advice that change had to occur slowly and that those involved would have to make the choice on their own. Each major change (teaming, block scheduling, and double-blocking of certain content areas) started with a small group of teachers and spread by example. One teacher shared how strong an influence other groups' successes could be: "Once you see how it works, you can't help but feel envious because you want to do the same thing" (Language Arts Teacher-b).

An important aspect of these changes was that they were always implemented by groups of teachers working together and were never dependent on individual performers. Group change happened by design. Ms. Gonzalez explained how "I would tell them, I don't want any prima donnas here. That doesn't help me. I don't want one teacher to be successful. I want all my hundred and some-odd [teachers to be successful]." Change took time. "This was not easy," one teacher recalled "It took us years to learn how to work with other teachers" (Teacher Focus Group).

Moving Forward

The Memorial school community members are proud of their accomplishments, but they realize that the infrastructure they have built and the strong relationships they have with one another make any areas of need very visible. They know they still have a lot of work to do to fulfill the objectives and goals they share. It is evident from everyday practice that the staff are always identifying problems and possible solutions. Much of their planning focuses on the new state tests that students will take in the 2002–03 school year. Memorial's Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) details a variety of content area professional development sessions that staff have already participated in and will continue to attend for the next three years. The CIP also documents how classroom instruction is changing to reflect the higher-order thinking skills that will be required for success on the new tests and the district goal to have at least 35 percent of the students enrolled in Pre-AP classes.

The band director demonstrated the excitement shared by Memorial's staff about the changes they still want to make:

> I love it. Maybe I'll retire in the next five years, but the more I look at it, I don't feel like it. 'Cause I love my job and I love what I do here. I think that tells you a lot. I love my parents. I love the staff here. It's beautiful. I think everybody should come teach at Memorial. . . . It's a good staff and we have a good principal and . . . administration and the whole—the whole shebang!

Principal Castillon explains how captivating the learning environment is to the staff and students alike. Pointing to a classroom near his office he explained,

> You can feel it when you walk into her classroom. You can see what she's doing. You look at the kids, you look at their eyes and you listen to the teacher, you look at the bulletin boards, and you don't want to leave. You don't want to leave. You want to sit there and—and see what's happening, you know? You want to—you want to finish the lesson.

Raising awareness of what needs to be done and making solid plans will be important to Memorial's continued success, but it is the energy of the staff that will allow them to overcome any future barriers.

Pocomoke Middle School

Pocomoke School District

Pocomoke City, Maryland

Pocomoke Middle School

Pocomoke City, Maryland

Roughly ten miles from the Virginia border on the southern tip of Maryland's Eastern Shore sits Pocomoke City. Tall pine trees line the flat land of the Delmarva Peninsula between Baltimore and Pocomoke City. A Wal-mart, a few chain restaurants, and a hotel flank Route 13 at the edge of Pocomoke City. Students note that to shop in a mall or a see a movie, they must travel roughly twenty-five miles north to Salisbury. Surrounding Pocomoke Middle School is a small neighborhood with mostly white, two-story wood houses. Streets are quiet, and there is the feeling of prosperity. Several blocks out on Cedar Street toward Clark, the neighborhood begins to change. The houses look to have been built during the same time period, but many are in need of repair, and signs of the city's poverty become more evident. Wet clothes hang on lines in the damp air, and plastic covers many windows. Government housing units intermingle with these houses. Northeast toward the river is downtown Pocomoke, filled with small shops and businesses. Market Street dead-ends into a park on the Pocomoke River. A sign leading into the city reads, "Welcome to Pocomoke City, the Friendliest Town on the Eastern Shore."

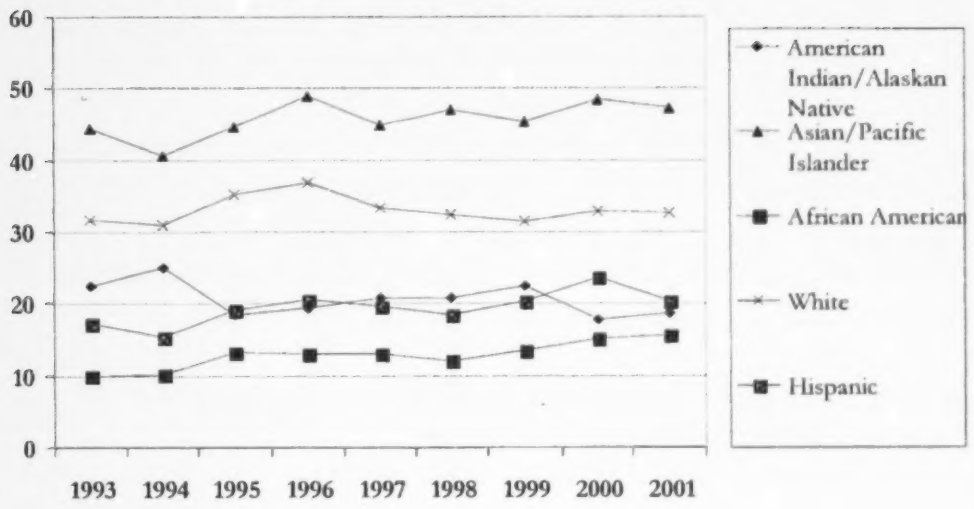
According to the 2000 census, 4,098 people reside in the Pocomoke City. Most of the middle school students live in the town, while some live out in Worcester County's more rural areas. Also located in Worcester County, about an hour north of Pocomoke City, is Ocean City, a popular spot for summer tourism. Many Pocomoke residents obtain seasonal employment in Ocean City during summer months, but during the winter months when the tourism industry is less active, unemployment is higher. Because of Pocomoke City's poverty, a state enterprise zone has been located there. This program provided funding to build an industrial park in the 1980s and also provided tax credits for businesses to relocate there. School staff members note that a lot of students' families are employed in nearby industries like the Tyson chicken plant, the Beretta gun factory, and a food distribution plant. Other students have parents employed in professional positions both within the town of Pocomoke and at NASA, which sits just on the other side of the Virginia border.

State Context

Maryland uses a statewide assessment called the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), and student performance data on this assessment are available dating back to 1993. The MSPAP assesses students in grades 3, 5, and 8 in reading, writing, language usage, science, social studies, and mathematics. The assessment differs from most other state assessments in that it includes no multiple choice items. Instead, students provide written answers to open-ended items, and between 700 and 800 teachers grade the examinations over the summer. Student performance data for the MSPAP are available online at *msp.msde.state.md.us*, and the data are available disaggregated by both race and income. However, detailed information about the performance of individual students on this examination is not available to teachers and parents.

Scores on the eighth-grade MSPAP do not demonstrate the same growth rates that are found in some other states, and this may reflect the fact that the state has intentionally adopted a very rigorous assessment.

Figure 5: Eight-Grade MSPAP Scores by Race and Income



Source: Maryland State Department of Education

Recently, the state legislature decided to make participation in the eighth-grade component of this examination optional for non-Title I schools. The state is currently reviewing this assessment and plans to make alterations to it so that it will fit within the requirements of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002. As part of these changes, students entering the ninth grade in the fall of 2003 will have to pass five end of course exams in English, algebra, geometry, biology, and government.

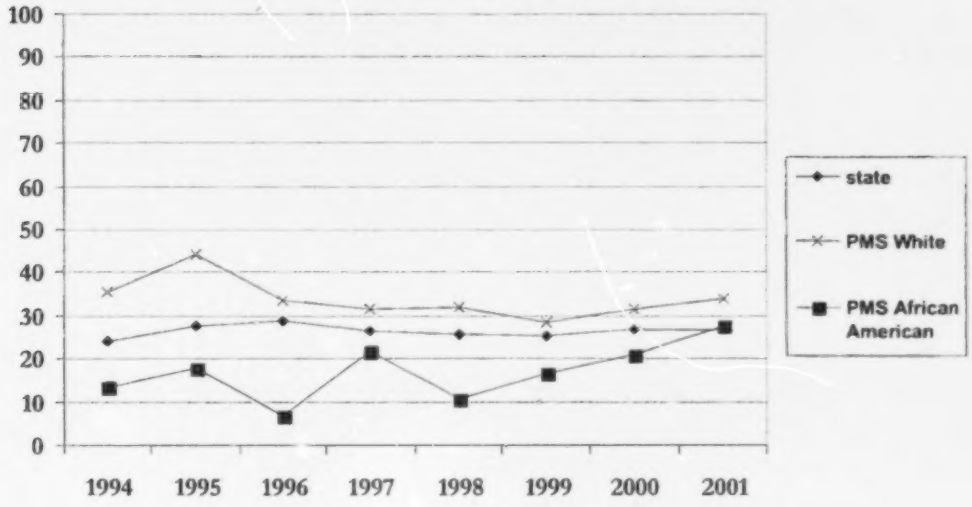
School Demographics

During the 1999–2000 school year, the middle school served 536 students in grades 4 through 8, and 51 percent of its population was eligible to participate in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. The state of Maryland has divided into countywide school districts, and more students from low-income backgrounds reside in Pocomoke City than in other cities in Worcester County. Pocomoke Middle School is the only one of the county's three middle schools that qualifies to be a schoolwide Title I campus, although one other middle school will qualify next year. During the 1999-00 school year, 52 percent of Pocomoke Middle School's students were African American, and 47 percent were white. Asian and Hispanic students made up the other 1 percent.

Student Achievement

Pocomoke Middle School has been recognized by the Maryland State Department of Education for demonstrating three years of consistent growth on the Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), and as part of this recognition the school received a check for $44,843 last year. Pocomoke Middle School's student performance on the MSPAP reading exam illustrates an overall improvement in performance as well as a decline in the racial gap that existed in prior years. Now both African American and white students are performing at or above the state average in reading.

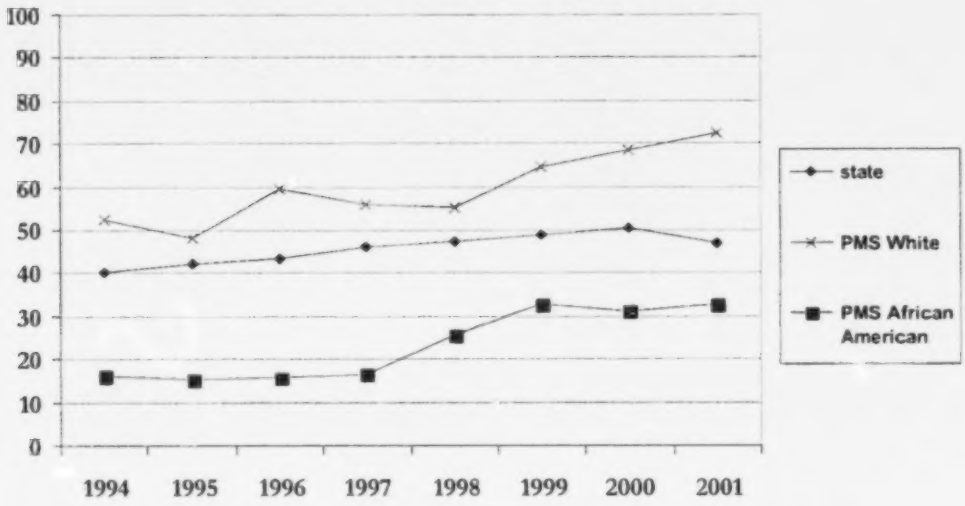
Figure 6: Percentage of Pocomoke Middle School's Eighth-Graders Passing the MSPAP Reading Exam



Source: Maryland State Department of Education

Additionally, although there is still a gap in performance between white and African American students on the mathematics exam, performance for both groups has been steadily improving over the past several years, while state averages have improved only slightly. And while the performance of African American students has continued to improve, the school recognizes that the still-existent gap is an area that requires attention.

Figure 7: Percentage of Pocomoke Middle School's Eighth-Graders Passing the MSPAP Mathematics Exam



Source: Maryland State Department of Education

Portrait of the School

Although all of Pocomoke's fourth- through eighth-grade students are housed in the same building, the fourth- and fifth-graders are located on one side of the building in self-contained classrooms, while the sixth- through eighth-graders are in classrooms clustered by grade level on the other side of the building. Up until this year, sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade classes shared two hallways and two portable units. The renovation of a mini-gym into six classrooms last summer has provided a separate pod for each grade level and allowed the elimination of the outside portable units. Spending time in the building, one is left with the impression that the school community is proud of their accomplishments, that students are at the center of instruction, and that teachers work within the context of a strong accountability system, but that they are provided with significant supports that help them succeed within this context.

Creating a Positive School Climate

The pride that staff members take in their school is reflected in both the care they devote to maintaining an attractive building and in the expectations they hold for students. The school's principal, Caroline Bloxom, explains that both of these are priorities. One of her first goals upon coming to the school was to improve the way that people think about the school: "I want the kids and the teachers and the community to take real pride in the school." The school building itself receives a lot of attention from staff members who want to ensure that it is maintained in a way that is conducive to learning, students are taught how to behave appropriately so that that the learning process is not interrupted, and the fact that interactions take place within the context of a small and connected community helps ensure that individuals know one another well and care about each other's success.

Establishing a Comfortable Learning Environment

The school, built in 1970, is a large brick structure, with a walkway leading from a circular drive to the front door. Yellow and white daffodils and neatly trimmed hedges line the path, and benches sit off to the sides. The student government recently bought a stone fountain that stands just inside the building between the two large front doors. Water falls from the fountain into a small pond surrounded by silk plants and cedar chips. The sound of the fountain sets a relaxing tone for anyone entering the building.

Large wall displays on brightly colored paper hang next to the front office. One, titled "Women Making a Difference," displays *Time Magazine* covers of famous women such as Madeline Albright, Mother Teresa, and Sandra Day O'Connor. Another displays the school philosophy: "The staff of Pocomoke Middle School welcomes all, embraces each, supports everyone, and hopes that you find yourselves better for having been here!" Beneath are photographs of staff members grouped into teams: grade-level teams, the custodial team, the administrative team, and the cafeteria team. Across from these displays, a large sculpture mounted on the wall depicts students and staff engaged in various activities such as eating lunch, working on a computer, performing science experiments, and playing in the band. A plaque by the sculpture explains that it was funded by a grant from the Maryland State Arts Council and constructed in 1993 by students under the supervision of an artist-in-residence. Other bulletin boards located throughout the school display the names of students who have been recognized by their teachers as mathematicians of the month, writers of the month, scientists of the month, and geographers of the month. A parent says that although the building is old, it is very well kept and feels new: "What amazes me, because I did go to school here [is] . . . that it's still bright and clean and . . . it's kind of like being in a new place" (Parent Focus Group).

Fostering Responsible Behavior

The school is engaging in a concerted effort to improve student behavior. As part of this effort, the school has adopted a theme: "Respect + Responsibility = Pocomoke Pride!" Staff members talk frequently with students about what it means to act in respectful and responsible ways. Both before school and during class transitions, students and staff are relaxed, but staff members quickly address even minor rule violations. The curriculum planner who, along with the administrative team, helps supervise students during these transitions, says that staff members "closely supervise the students and keep them productively engaged so that they do not have an opportunity to get into trouble" (General Observation Notes). A teacher explains how the school's strategy for improving behavioral expectations has become a schoolwide effort to teach children about responsible behavior:

> Our school theme talks about respect and responsibility. And that kind of covers a lot of ground. Instead of being very specific about you can't do this, you can't do that, it just covers a lot of things where you're constantly talking about how that theme looks in different areas of school and how people can display that in different kinds of situations. But it's kind of an overall thing that needs to permeate the whole school. . . . It's a tool that's being used every day. (Teacher Focus Group)

In addition to adopting common language around behavioral expectations and structures to support them, the school staff focus on reinforcing positive behavior from students. Staff members recognize students who meet behavioral expectations by passing out Pocomoke Pride slips that students can enter into daily drawings. A music teacher explains the impact this has on students:

> The kids are coming to school now and instead of negativity we're looking for positive things to reinforce them with. Mr. Perry instituted the Pocomoke Pride slips, and I have students who are constantly trying to do things, tripping over themselves to get caught being good.

Two grants support these efforts: one for establishing a character education program and a second for bringing in Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies, which is a program designed to help the school create an atmosphere that is conducive to helping students act responsibly. Not only do teachers describe the positive effect these efforts have on school climate, but the school has also been recognized as a 2001 Maryland Character Education School for their success in implementing a successful character education program. Ms. Bloxom and a guidance counselor were invited to present Pocomoke Middle School's Character Education Program at the 2002 Maryland Character Education Conference.

The assistant principal says that the school's approach to student discipline is to create conditions that elicit positive behavior from students. He works with teachers to help them reflect on: "Could the environment have been set up differently . . . so the student never did display that behavior? Or if . . . the behavior was displayed, could the teacher have reacted differently and gotten a different reaction?" (Assistant Principal). He also says that maintaining good relationships with students and community members helps him better handle problems when they do occur: "I think the major issue with parents there is trust. You have to develop trust. The community has to trust that you have their child's best interest in mind. And that you're fair."

Working in a Small, Connected Community

Several factors contribute to the community feeling that exists in this school. In addition to the school's small size and small class sizes, there is a core of veteran staff members who have worked at Pocomoke for as many as 30 years; many staff also live in the community. Some teachers went to Pocomoke Middle School and have come back to teach. One even has younger brothers and sisters attending the school in addition to a mother who substitute teaches and a sister who works with the after-school program. Additionally, many parents who went to this school now send their children. One parent explains,

> All my favorite [teachers] are still here. And then for my daughter to be able to experience that. And I know that they reach out to her because they know me and they know my family. And they know my mom and . . . it's just irreplaceable. (Parent Focus Group)

So although the school faces significant turnover among new teachers, it also has a group of teachers, administrators, parents, and students who have strong ties to and a long history with the school and community. One teacher describes the importance of maintaining relationships with students and parents:

> Oh gosh. I think everybody knows me here. . . . I even know their little brothers and sisters now. The parents feel very open and free to come up and ask questions about "Hey what's happened at school?" And we try to make a very strong point . . . [when] somebody says something like, "I bet you're glad it's a weekend," we try to make it a point and tell them, "No, not really, I can't see the students on a weekend, can't wait till Monday." We want to make the kids realize that we're happy to see them. (Music Teacher)

Staff members talk about how they know one another and how they know the students, often referring to the school community as family-like. As a result, they care about each other and about their students. They often talk about the need to support one another as they deal with the challenges and stresses associated with their work.

Attending to All Students

Staff provide additional academic support to students who are struggling to meet high expectations expressed in the MSPAP. The school operates a reading lab, and students identified as needing help give up an elective period in order to attend this additional reading class. The school also runs an after-school program each day, and students can receive academic support through this program. Teachers are paid to stay after school, and they provide a wide variety of options to students. Some of these, like the history club and mathematics tutoring, have an academic focus. Others offer activities like basketball and swimming. Further student support is provided within classrooms, through student-centered curriculum and instruction.

Focusing on Curriculum and Instruction

Teachers are thoughtful about how to structure classroom time in ways that engage students and that support achievement around higher-order thinking skills. Evidence of writing in all subject areas and of integration across subject areas exists throughout the school. Seventh-grade students have been working on a mathematics project in their language arts classes, and mathematics teachers regularly ask students to write about their problem solving processes.

Additionally, subject areas that have traditionally been thought of as nonacademic are now engaging students in higher-level thinking and writing activities that integrate fine arts with other subject areas. A poster in the cafeteria titled "Sixth-Grade Fauvists" displays a Venn diagram students made comparing Fauvism to Impressionism, and student examples of Fauvist work surround the poster. The music teacher recently completed a unit on the national anthem in which students learned about its history and its meaning. In these lessons, the teacher combined learning how to sing the song with engaging students in a debate about which versions of the song most portray what students perceive the song's message to be. Students used newspaper articles about some controversial adaptations of the song as a springboard for discussion.

The after-school program also embodies this effort to engage students in high-level activities that cross multiple curricular areas. The mathematics teacher describes one of the after-school programs as "remediation and enrichment closed in together" because, although one of the program's goals is to provide additional academic support for struggling students, this support is provided in the form of challenging and relevant projects. For example, teachers helped students write and receive two grants to construct a pond in one of the school's courtyards. Students used writing skills as they drafted and revised their application, and mathematical skills when they determined the measurements of the pond. Students submitted two proposals and received a total of $4,700 to begin construction of their pond, which they hope can serve as an outdoor science lab in addition to sprucing up their school courtyards.

As part of their emphasis on writing, teachers ask students to participate in milestone examinations. These examinations are countywide. Teachers use consistent rubrics to score them. These help teachers see how their classes are performing in relation to other classes, and also enable them to share in-depth student-level information with parents. Teresa Hammerbacher, former Pocomoke Middle School principal, believes that this is especially important because the state-administered MSPAP does not provide adequate individual student information. These assessments help parents understand how their children are progressing in relation to state standards.

Providing Support in Conjunction with Accountability

Several members of the staff mention the stress associated with trying to prepare students for the three different assessments in place at the middle school level: the Maryland Functional Tests, which are lower-level tests in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics, that students begin taking in the sixth grade and have to eventually pass in order to graduate; the California Test of Basic Skills, a nationally norm-referenced test that focuses more on content than process; and the MSPAP, a very rigorous assessment that engages students in open-ended activities that integrate different curricular areas. Although teachers spend time preparing students for each of these examinations, the MSPAP has the most dramatic impact on both curriculum and instruction because it is a key element of the state accountability system. In Maryland's accountability system, schools are being held accountable for the performance of their students by both the state and the county.

In response to the adoption of this assessment, the school has established checklists to be turned in by teachers every month outlining activities for students. These activities include specific numbers of writing assignments and open-ended assessments designed to prepare students for the MSPAP. Additionally, the county requires teachers to administer and score open-ended assessment activities each semester. Both the campus and the county collect data from these assessments. Staff members note that meeting new requirements can be stressful for some teachers, but in addition to placing high demands on teachers, the county provides a significant level of support to teachers to help them meet these expectations.

Accessing Assistance from the County

Pocomoke Middle School's success is certainly related to the hard work of the staff and students on that campus, but staff members also credit some of their success to the fact that they exist within the context of a supportive county. The principal, who worked at the county level until recently, explains that this county is ranked first in the state in terms of improvement on MSPAP and fifth with respect to overall scores. Additionally, this county is one of only four that improved last year, when overall declining scores in the state caused many to question the validity of the test. The state has had the scores independently verified and stands behind their validity, but they have also decided to make this test optional at the eighth-grade level for non-Title I schools.[15]

Teachers say that working within a successful county makes them more motivated to perform well and demonstrate that their students are capable. One teacher explains, "The whole county is doing exceptionally well and we're really working hard to do well, and so we're always fighting. . . . We certainly can't coast" (Teacher Focus Group). Additionally, the principal notes that the county is committed to supporting teachers and setting high expectations:

> But our county is very good to teachers and because of Ocean City, our teachers are well paid [compared to neighboring counties] on the shore.[16] We have very good benefits. But people seem to sense, when they're hired here, that there are very high expectations of them, that the standards are not only high for the children, but they're high for the teachers.

In addition to higher salaries, teachers say they are able to get the supplies and materials they need. The county also enables the school to maintain small classes, with all classes below a twenty-

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[15] For a description of the verification of scores, see www.msde.state.md.us/pressreleases/2002/january/2002_0123.htm.

[16] Because of the tourism associated with Ocean City, this county had access to more property tax revenue than their neighboring counties.

to-one student–teacher ratio and sometimes going as low as twelve-to-one. The principal notes that the central office administrators are aware that Pocomoke City faces greater challenges than the rest of the county with respect to educating more children living in poverty, and so they provide the school with some additional resources for class-size reduction to help them address these challenges.

Investing in Teachers

Although most everyone agrees that the county is very supportive of their school, one negative aspect of being located within such a strong county is that Pocomoke often loses teachers to other county schools. Because of their location in the poorest, southernmost tip of an otherwise fairly wealthy county, the school faces a turnover problem with new teachers who often transfer out of the school after gaining a few years experience. In an effort to help the school solve this problem, the county began enforcing a policy that new teachers could not ask for a transfer until they had served for three years on the same campus. Additionally, the county has been very proactive in seeking grants, and one of these funded a beginning teacher mentoring program. Through this program, two retired teachers have been hired by the county to provide mentoring to teachers new to the county, and because Pocomoke has the bulk of the county's new teachers (42 percent of Pocomoke's teachers have been at the school fewer than three years), they also have greater access to the mentor teachers hired through this grant. The principal explains how mentors help beginning teachers adjust both to their profession and to the district's expectations:

> They work here three days a week and their sole job is to support our new teachers. They help them with planning. They help them with classroom management. They help them with how [to] conduct a parent conference. If they don't know enough to help a particular teacher with their content area, they make the calls to the supervisors and coordinators to get them down here. They not only do some training themselves, but they also attend all of our inservices so that they're up to speed on . . . best practices that we're promoting.

Not only do beginning teachers receive significant support, but the school and the county invest in enhancing the capacity of all teachers. One teacher says, "Basically, any professional development, if we ask for it, most of the time we can get it" (Mathematics Teacher). These opportunities are available to teachers during the instructional day, and the county provides substitute teachers to cover classrooms during this time. Opportunities are also available after school and over the summers. Recently, teachers have attended workshops on differentiating instruction and on closing the achievement gap between African-American and white students. The amount of professional development the county offers each summer indicates the county's commitment to building teacher capacity:

> One summer we offered 183 inservices for teachers . . . At the time we had this entire booklet of all the descriptions and who could apply. . . . And I remember when it came out [the staff development coordinator from a neighboring county] looked at me and she goes, "How in the world do you all afford to offer all this staff development?" But our county just has made an investment in that. (Principal)

In addition to the staff development opportunities offered by the county, the school focuses on allowing teachers more flexibility in selecting professional development opportunities that meet their individual needs. According to the principal, they are trying to work with teachers in the same way they encourage teachers to work with students:

> We have been moving very much into promoting differentiated instruction in the classroom. So I came to this job thinking, "Well, it's not quite fair to tell teachers to differentiate when I'm having—if I have a veteran teacher who is an excellent classroom manager sit through a classroom management inservice, I've pretty much wasted their time."

In an effort to improve their offerings, the School Improvement Team, consisting of both teachers and administrators, now develops a menu of opportunities from which teachers can select based on individual needs. One teacher has recommended that the school add teacher-led study groups to this list of options so that teachers can focus more in depth on a particular area of interest over the course of an entire year, and this is something the school plans to incorporate next year.

Providing Teachers Time to Collaborate

The environment at this school is structured to encourage collaboration between teachers, and teachers talk about how important collaboration is to their success in the classroom. A second year teacher notes,

> I know coming in last year to the sixth-grade team, we only had two teachers left over. And they were very supportive. So when you're coming into a team in a school, you have that team as a support structure for you to help you come along. (Mathematics Teacher)

Sixth- through eighth-grade teachers have two forty-five-minute planning periods each day—one to use for individual planning and one for meeting with interdisciplinary teams. During this time, teachers discuss curricular issues, talk through problems that individual students may be having, meet with parents, and plan grade-level activities. In addition, teachers sometimes use this time to observe other classrooms. These walkthroughs are an opportunity for teachers to learn from one another:

> We have scheduled walkthroughs for all our teams. So that was another thing I thought was great, because my first year I always thought I could learn so much by just sitting in somebody's class and these same kids that I'm having problems with, all of a sudden they're angels in this one person's class. And you're going "Why? What's the difference?" . . . You learn just from organizational skills that the person has and environment in the classroom and things like that. (Teacher Focus Group)

After conducting walkthroughs, teachers talk about what they saw and learned in grade-level team meetings. The seventh-grade team explained to the principal that these walkthroughs help them gain a better understanding of students' experiences at the elementary school level: "We didn't even know about the elementary program. We're seventh grade, we don't even know what they're doing in fourth and fifth. So we saw a whole new world" (Principal).

Story of Change

Staff members from this district, especially those with a long history with the school, do not talk about dramatic, overnight changes. Instead, they describe always having placed a high priority on student needs, and having a long history of working well as a school community:

> Our school has always had a wonderful philosophy. We've always had a family-type environment for working in, wonderful students and parents. And we've always been very, very hard-working, self-driven, motivated teachers here. So much that even

> with different principals, we knew what to do and we were always working and always on task. We know hard work; we like it. (Teacher Focus Group)

However, when staff members reflect on the school's history, they consistently describe several important changes and tend to agree that most of these have been driven by the state educational reform movement and the implementation of MSPAP.

Initially, teachers were not sure as to the extent state reform efforts would actually require them to alter their practice. One teacher explains that in the early days, many people did not expect the reform movement to last: "MSPAP was just coming along. No one was really taking it seriously. 'It's going to go away,' they kept saying. 'It's going to go away' " (Language Arts Teacher). But as time passed, staff members began to recognize that they were going to have to adapt their practice in order to be successful within the new state context. Several important changes took place in the early years of the MSPAP, including the implementation of School Improvement Teams, the use of joint planning time for grade-level teams, and a push to change curriculum and instruction to better align them with the demands of the MSPAP.

Changing Classroom Practice

The most important changes that took place on this campus probably happened inside classrooms. To prepare for state assessments, teachers in all subject areas were asked to alter their classroom practices to focus on open-ended activities and to include writing in all content areas. This is markedly different from prior years when "teachers were . . . given a few guidelines, but for the most part, we were left to our own devices to figure out what it was that kids needed. We had individual curriculums" (Language Arts Teacher). This teacher, who described herself as "seasoned," has been in the classroom for fourteen years. For teachers like her who spent several years refining curricula that worked well for them, making dramatic changes was difficult, and not everyone always agreed on how to make change or even if they ought to make it. For other teachers, the idea of refining the curriculum was appealing; it provided some much-needed direction to those new to the district and the profession. A language arts teacher recalled how difficult it was for him to find adequate information about curriculum his first year:

> We've actually begun to form a curriculum, so that's been happening probably over the past two years. And that's been, of course, driven by the state content standards. But that's, for me, a change that's been . . . a good one because first coming in, you don't have a clue about what you're supposed to teach. And you ask and nobody really can tell you, you know? So it's been good to have that change. (Teacher Focus Group)

Interestingly, while some teachers view the changes to curriculum as more restrictive, others feel that the more recent focus on outcomes has left them with more freedom than before. Some of this difference may be related to content area, with mathematics teachers now moving away from a restrictive curriculum. One mathematics teacher explains,

> When I first came, . . . they used to give us [instructions] from the [central] office. It was like a planned schedule throughout the whole year. Okay, this week you should be on this page. . . . And basically it took you through the whole textbook, but you knew every week what you were supposed to be covering. And now we don't have that at all. We have the content standards and the outcomes from the state, and we know what we have to cover and the order is ours, the decision about when and where is ours, as long as what you're teaching covers that. (Teacher Focus Group)

Staff members on this campus often disagreed as to how best to serve students, but they also seemed to operate with the understanding that they were all committed to serving students well, and even those who disagreed with one another respected each other. The Title I coordinator who worked on the campus for twenty-seven years notes, "Over time there's been a lot of resistance because teachers are notoriously protective of what they believe to be the best for their students." The assistant principal explains, "The reason we argue is because we both feel so passionately about . . . how to help the kids. And we feel differently, and we're arguing because we both feel strongly about it." Maintaining the understanding that all teachers were committed to the education of students and providing teachers time to talk about their work helped them begin to reach some agreement regarding how best to reach their goals.

Finding Common Ground

One of the strategies that this school used to help teachers begin to find some common ground regarding how best to help students was to provide them with daily blocks of common planning time in which to talk about curriculum and instruction. This addition began at roughly the same time the state began requiring students to take the MSPAP:

> Having team meetings in middle school is really important for buy-in because you get a set of people who work with the same kids meeting together every day to talk about curriculum issues, to talk about management issues, to plan together, to commiserate together, and then to celebrate together. (Ex-principal)

In addition to offering teachers time to plan together, the county spent time with teachers, thinking about how to structure this time effectively. The summer before team-planning time was implemented, teachers and administrators attended staff development on how to make teaming successful. Former principal Teresa Hammerbacher explains,

> We had some summer workshops, and administrators and teachers were invited to those. They were sponsored by the county and then it seems to me the local university had some that some of us attended. And then you work with key people to set up suggestions for what should happen Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. And then set up some expectations for what you expect to happen during team time.

Enlisting Technical Assistance from the County

In addition to receiving time to collaborate in team meetings, teachers were given access to a significant amount of technical assistance. They had access to curriculum specialists on the campus, and consultants were able to bring teachers together from middle schools across the county to discuss curriculum alignment. One teacher says that trying to align curricula at the middle school level was particularly difficult because it was important to examine standards for both elementary school and high school in order to understand what students were exposed to before coming to middle school and what will be expected of them when they leave. He notes, "I learned a lot in the process, but it was just very nerve-wracking" (Teacher Focus Group).

Consultants also brought teachers together to help them write and score assessment items that were aligned with the MSPAP. After teachers scored the exams, consultants assembled data regarding how students were progressing to share with teachers and administrators:

> For example, the seventh-grade teachers today are scoring a task that was developed by the teachers and the consultants a while back. . . . And they get staff development

> while they're doing it because they talk about the things that they're seeing that the kids are doing. Then what will happen tomorrow evening at the end of the day is the principals will meet at the central office with the consultant, who will then go through with them what they saw, what was good, how the kids have moved, what they need to focus on. (Title I Coordinator)

Within this framework, staff development became more than simple one-time attendance at workshops. Instead, teachers engaged in active, ongoing discussions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These discussions revolved around work that students were doing, and they resulted in actual changes in classroom practice. In this way, teachers were able to develop a shared understanding of what high-level student work ought to look like. Consultants followed through on these meetings with administrators so that all members of the school community were moving in the same direction.

Implementing Change Through the School Improvement Team

At the same time the state implemented the MSPAP, it also mandated the creation of School Improvement Teams on each campus. Teachers and administrators say that by implementing many of the changes through the School Improvement Team that includes teachers, staff members have been able to become part of the decision making process:

> Usually, from my sense of what happened in the past, it would be the principal or one or two other people, and generally probably just the principal saying okay, this year we're going to work on so-and-so. Or the board will say you need to work on this this year as a county goal. And because of the [School Improvement Team] plans, for the first couple of years, we're going: "What is this? How do we do this?" And gradually as we had more staff members become involved in the writing of the [School Improvement] plan, you get greater buy-in from the staff and that helps with a common language. We're more in this together. (Ex-principal)

One teacher explains that the team approach to decision making has been successful at Pocomoke because most teachers feel they have a real voice in making changes: "The idea that was exciting was the fact that it is collaborative. The idea that teachers are not just reacting to changes that are imposed upon them. That you take ownership of the process of improvement" (Teacher Focus Group).

Maintaining Stability in the Face of Change

The Pocomoke staff adapted to a lot of changes at once, and most staff members agree that one of the reasons they were able to succeed was that they had stability of leadership throughout this process. The assistant principal came to the middle school one year after the adoption of the new state tests and remembers how the school was in a state of flux:

> I think this school was in a lot of transition at the time I assumed the position . . . they had a new principal. And they also had a new assistant principal who had never been an administrator before. So both the principal and the vice principal were put into the position, neither one having administrative experience. And I understand at that time they also had some counseling changes, secretarial changes. The office staff was in a lot of transition.

But the principal who came on board that year stayed for nine years, and Caroline Bloxom, who replaced her, had been on the Pocomoke campus as a teacher and as a curriculum coordinator and had also worked at the county level as the staff development coordinator and the K–12 mathematics coordinator, so she was able to bring some new ideas to the school, but also maintain some consistency. A veteran teacher describes the impact of this stability: "I'm probably the eldest of the people here. I've been here the longest. And what I saw at the beginning of this school, when it was first built, many things are still in place. Not only programs, but philosophies" (Teacher Focus Group). The campus principal agrees that the school has been steadily improving and credits each of the school's five administrators with bringing about some improvement:

> In the 32-year history of the school, I believe that every principal comes in and they assess where they think the school is at that given time, and their agenda is to move it forward. So I would say that all five administrators have in some way, through their own vision of what they want this school to be, they've moved it forward.

In addition to the hard work of all staff members, several individuals were critical to Pocomoke's improvement over the past ten years. Early on, the leadership of Ms. Hammerbacher helped teachers adapt to dramatic changes in the way students were assessed and in the way teachers were expected to conduct their work. Staff members describe her as "very knowledgeable of curriculum" and say that "she significantly impacted how we approach teaching and academics" (Assistant Principal). This former principal explains that she was especially motivated to improve scores because of the negative way low scores reflected on students:

> There was one year that our fifth-grade writing scores came back at like 11 percent or 13 percent [passing], and it was like oh my gosh, what are we doing. And the curriculum planner and I met with the fifth-grade team frequently after that, and we talked about [how] our kids were not 11 percent kids or they weren't 13 percent kids. They were better than that and how could we structure our instruction to make sure that our kids were demonstrating on the test how capable they really were. We didn't think that was the picture of who our kids were.

At this same time, the school's curriculum specialists were also instrumental in helping the school adapt. These individuals had worked for the state, grading actual MSPAP assessments over the summer early in the test's administration, and so they had developed a strong understanding of exactly what was expected of students and how assessments were scored. These two people then helped Pocomoke develop schoolwide assessments that teachers scored together, and these became the basis for the countywide assessments that would follow. A teacher explained how these two individuals were especially important: "They were fairly visionary as far as what they saw had to be done to get where we had to go, and got things started early" (Teacher Focus Group).

Most recently, Principal Bloxom has undertaken an effort to build on past successes, taking the organization to the next level. Because of her history in the county, she has a strong working knowledge of curriculum and instruction issues as well as an understanding of the school and community. She describes returning to the school as an administrator as being "like coming home." One member of the School Improvement Team explains that the principal has done an effective job of striking a difficult balance between sharing decision making with staff and being willing to take responsibility when necessary:

> I think Caroline has done a good job of kind of being, saying "I'm open to certain things." At the same time she'll make the final decision. . . . I feel like if we have

> something reasonable that makes sense, it will be seriously considered. So I think that makes it more exciting to be here because you feel like you can . . . actually maybe do something about [problems that arise]. (Teacher Focus Group)

In their recent improvement efforts, the school has been focusing on several areas. Some of these, like the improvements in student behavior and improvements in facilities, have already demonstrated their effects, but even as student achievement scores continue to rise, the staff has identified areas that they hope to focus on as they continue to grow and improve.

Moving Forward

The Pocomoke staff has identified some areas that they want to continue to work on, and there has been some evidence of early success. They are making new efforts to reach out to parents and community members, and they are also focusing on improving the academic performance of struggling students.

Establishing Trusting Relationships with Parents

Several staff members explained that the school has recently begun placing a greater emphasis on making parents feel welcomed into the school, and they talk openly about the fact that this has not always been an easy task. One teacher says that the school has to take into consideration the fact that many parents do shift work in businesses that may not allow them to take time off to come in for regular conferences. Others note that some parents' negative school experiences may cause them to feel less comfortable in schools as adults. Still others maintain that middle school students are reaching an age where they are less likely to want their parents to be at the school. One way the school has attempted to deal with this issue is to bring parents into the school for activities that enable them time to develop relationships with teachers:

> No problem getting parents involved in an elementary school. Middle school scares them away. And we've discussed that round and round here on the different committees as to why that is. But just offering opportunities to get the parents to come in where it's non-confrontational. You're coming in tonight to do something fun with your child and no one is going to come and tell you that your child misbehaved in class at all. No one's going to approach you and say your child hasn't turned in their homework for three weeks. Just to get them to come into the building to feel comfortable and to see what their children are doing and the kinds of great things that go on here every day. (Teacher Focus Group)

Notably absent from teacher explanations of their difficulty in improving parent involvement is any talk of parents not caring about how their children do in school; teachers seem to understand that parents care about their children and want them to succeed, even if attending school functions is not part of how they express that support.

The school's efforts to reach out to parents have begun to show some signs of success. The Title I coordinator states that parents have become more active in the PTA, and the assistant principal points to the recent strong attendance at an ice cream social held for students and their families. However, most staff members agree that there is still some room for improvement. One parent notes that although she believes relationships between parents and staff members are improving, the school still has some work to do in terms of making sure that all parents feel welcomed and comfortable at school. She also believes that she probably feels more confident in the

school than other parents may, and thinks that school personnel need to continue to focus in this area:

> In order to engage the parents, you've got to be genuine and you've got to want that and you can't just talk it, but you've got to show people that "I want you here." And so that means when you come, I'm going to make you feel welcome. (Parent Focus Group)

She also suggests that, since not all parents have the same level of comfort with school personnel, some parents need to be taught how to work within the school system: "You know, just teaching our parents how to—when you have a frustration or a problem, what do you do? I know exactly which person to go to that cuts out all the middle people" (Parent Focus Group). Parents less savvy with the system may need this information made explicit.

Improving Academic Support for Students

Although the school has some important structures already in place for supporting individual students, they have also identified this as an area for further improvement. Recently, the staff decided to increase class size by two or three students per class in order to support programs in writing and mathematics similar to the reading lab that they already have. Through this change, struggling students would have access to an additional block of instructional time in these two core subject areas. When the principal surveyed the teachers to see if there was broad support for such an idea, teachers' replies were unanimously in favor of it.

The Pocomoke staff has a long history of steady improvement, and they will continue moving forward as they work on these difficult issues of how to make sure that parents feel that they are an important and welcome part of their children's education and of how to find additional ways of supporting individual students as they are challenged to meet increasingly high standards.

Although teachers may struggle over how best to accomplish these newly identified goals, they will likely continue talking and working for the benefit of their students because that is their mission and their history. One teacher explains that the very fact of these challenges is what makes Pocomoke Middle School interesting and exciting:

> For me, I like being at this school because of the fact that it's kind of a hands-on approach to problem solving. You feel that you're part of something. . . . And I think what's exciting about this is that you have a chance to really make a difference in a school like this, where you're really tested, your ability to teach is tested to the nth degree. If something is not good, it's just not going to not fly here, it's going to crash. (Teacher Focus Group)

As staff members remain committed to serving students and continue to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts, this school will continue to grow and improve.

Rockcastle County Middle School

Rockcastle County School District

Mount Vernon, Kentucky

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Rockcastle County Middle School

Mount Vernon, Kentucky

Sparse trees line the narrow Highway 25 leading into Rockcastle County. Dark, aging barns stand defiant of the wind, protecting the golden tobacco drying inside. Located along this highway in the small town of Mount Vernon is Rockcastle County Middle School. About half of the 712 middle school students live in Mount Vernon. The rest of the students are spread throughout the pockets and remote hollows of the rural county. Rockcastle County has some of the poorest and most isolated areas in Kentucky. Students from some of the hollows ride a bus for over an hour to get to school, and this is after a long walk to where the bus can pick them up, since some of the narrow, steep roads are impenetrable by large buses or small cars.

In the center of town sit small, family-owned businesses surrounded by small brick homes. The town quickly dissipates into winding roads taking travelers through steep passes. Abandoned barns, see-through cabins, and trailer homes dot the roadside. Some look relatively new, others are old and run-down. It is difficult to tell which trailers and houses are still inhabited and which have been abandoned. Toys lie scattered in the dirt in front of the trailers. Old cars pile next to the houses. Dilapidated farming machinery collects on hillsides. Kids wait for a bus beside a narrow single-lane road because there are no driveways to the trailers. Some trailers and houses still have backyard dumps within feet of their doors. Multiple families often share a dwelling.

Rockcastle County is an old farming community. About 80 percent of the county residents still try to make a living farming. The traditional crop for this area is tobacco. The recent public scrutiny of the tobacco industry has hurt farmers. Many had to abandon their farms or find another crop to plant. One farmer used to own a 400-acre tobacco farm where the new high school is now located. Because tobacco prices were so low, he felt he couldn't pass up the money offered to him by developers. The closing of this farm and others like it leaves behind only the narrow patches of the dark green fields lying fallow. Large, sprawling farms are a part of Rockcastle's past.

Coalmines were also part of Rockcastle's history. Most are closed today. Some small plastic and sewing factories have settled here. Mount Vernon has only a few small businesses such as grocery stores and auto parts stores. If people don't farm or work at the hospital or school district, they most likely commute outside of the county for employment.

State Context

In 1990, the Kentucky Legislature overhauled the school system through the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), which restructured school finance, governance, and curriculum. KERA mandated accountability for student performance. Legislation enacted in the spring of 1998 revised the statewide assessment program and created the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS), which assesses different content areas and grade levels using the Kentucky Core Content Tests (KCCT) and the nationally norm-referenced Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills Survey, Fifth Edition (CTBS/5). KCCT assesses reading and science in grades 4, 7, and 11/12; writing in grades 4, 7, and 12; and social studies, mathematics, arts and humanities, and practical living/vocational studies in grades 5, 8, 11, and 12. Proficiency in each of these broad content areas is measured using various types of assessments such as open-response, multiple-choice questions, and writing portfolios. CTBS assesses reading, language arts, and mathematics in grades 3, 6, and 9. These data must be reported by race, gender, and disability when appropriate. Student performance

data for the CATS are available online at *apps.kde.state.ky.us/cats_reports*. However, because the state adopted the CATS in 1998, long-term trend data is not available.

The Kentucky Board of Education adopted new performance standards in 2001. The adoption process involved more than 1,600 Kentucky teachers and various advisory groups. The new standards promote improving the academic achievement of all Kentucky students. The new standards define what it means for a student to perform at the "novice," "apprentice," "proficient" or "distinguished" level. They clarify for teachers, students, and parents how to evaluate student work, and they explain for students what is expected of them. At the middle school level, Kentucky created performance based standards for grade seven in Reading and Science and Mathematics, Social Studies, Practical Living/Vocational Studies, and Arts and Humanity for grade eight. More information can be found about the Kentucky standards at *http://www.kde.state.ky.us/comm/pubinfo/standards/*.

School Demographics

Sixty-one percent of Rockcastle County Middle School's students qualified for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program in the 1999–2000 school year. In that year, ninety-eight percent of the student population was white, reflecting the county's demographics. The county has only one middle school. It has served grades 6 through 8.

Student Achievement

Rockcastle County Middle School is the center of the community's pride. Kentucky recently listed the school as one of its top twenty middle schools. Test scores indicate impressive growth rates over the last five years, and students at Rockcastle perform at or above the state mean achievement measures from the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Fifth Edition (CTBS/5), a test that allows Rockcastle to compare their students to students from across the country. Student performance on the sixth-grade reading exam shows improvement of 39 percent over five years (compared to the state average of 2 percent); and mathematics performance has improved 28 percent (compared to the state average of 4 percent). Additionally, the student performance moved from below the state average percentile in reading, mathematics, and language arts to at or above the state average percentile in each of the three areas.

Table 10: Rockcastle Middle School Sixth-Graders' Performance on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, Fifth Edition

Year	Average percentile rank: Reading		Average percentile rank: Mathematics	
	School	State	School	State
1996–97	44	53	40	49
1997–98	45	53	46	49
1998–99	58	52	47	49
1999–2000	55	53	46	50
2000–01	61	54	51	51
Growth	38.6%	1.9%	27.5%	4.1%

Source: Kentucky Department of Education

Scores from an additional part of the Kentucky accountability system, the CATS also show growth. The scores are reported as a scale score with the range being from 0 to 140. The state goal is for all students to be scoring 100 or more by 2014. While Rockcastle County Middle School students' reading scores have decreased over the past three years, they are still higher than state scores. Additionally, mathematics scores are well above state averages, and scores on the mathematics exam have improved an impressive 39 percent.

Table 11: Rockcastle Middle School Students' Performance on the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System: Grades 7 and 8

Year	Average scale score: Reading Grade 7		Average scale score: Mathematics Grade 8	
	School	State	School	State
1998–99	92	78	54	57
1999–2000	89	78	60	60
2000–01	83	80	75	62
Growth	-9.8%	2.6%	38.9%	8.8%

Source: Rockcastle Independent School District

Portrait of the School

Rockcastle County Middle School is the only middle school in a county system of three elementary schools and one high school. In the 1999–2000 school year, the middle school served 712 students in grades 6 through 8. To make the transition smoother from elementary school, the middle school arranges itself into six grade-level teams, two at each grade level. This configuration allows teachers to have more contact with fewer students. Several factors contribute to the success of the school, including school climate, school organization, student support, and teacher support.

Creating a Positive School Climate

In the school's foyer, the quiet calm, brightly decorated walls, and orderly surroundings contradict the image of the typical middle school. Posters recognizing student work and murals advertising the school's mission cover the walls with evidence of an academic focus. The smiling front office staff greet everyone, strangers and friends alike, with the familiarity that comes from living and trusting in a small community. At 8:30 in the morning, several teachers and staff gather in the hallway. The principal, Anthony Coffey, joins them and stops one of the few passing students to ask if he went hunting this past weekend and how he did. After this short exchange, the student is reminded to "go on to class."

Rockcastle staff talk about genuinely caring for their students, not only in terms of academic success but also in terms of wanting what would be best for them. Mr. Coffey describes the need to understand middle school students developmentally so teachers can reach them academically. Teachers also talk about being "interested in the success of the child and not just looking at a test score, but wanting them to be able to do us proud when they're out [in the world]" (Teacher Focus Group). The school sets high expectations for respect, care, academic achievement, and collaboration for all members of this school.

Structuring the School

The school structure, both physical and organizational, helps attend to the developmental and academic needs of the students. The middle school is in the old high school building, which had separate wings for each of six departments. Middle school staff use the building's layout for an important physical arrangement of the school—the team concept. Each wing houses an interdisciplinary team. Each of the three grade levels has two teams with about 125 students on each team.

This team model creates six "schools within a school" (Teacher Focus Group). The team model also allows a physical separation between the different age groups, with the sixth-grade teams being housed on the opposite end of the school from the eighth-grade teams. The school has separate class schedules and lunch periods for each grade-level team. This strategy eliminates the use of bells and ensures that all the students are not in the hall at the same time; it is part of an effort to "make the kids feel safe" (Ex-principal).

Teachers' schedules are arranged to maximize the effectiveness of the teams' time together. By scheduling students to attend physical education and an elective together back-to-back every day, teachers have eighty free minutes to use for planning or discussing student-related issues with their teammates. Teachers and staff talk about the importance of the team concept because it is more "caring, accepting, and family[-like]" for the student than the traditional middle school model (Art Teacher). Adults in the school feel that because of the team approach they know their students better and can more easily identify student needs. One teacher explains,

> We have a system. If Johnny's having a bad day here, we know about Johnny's bad day and then we try to accommodate or to head Johnny off if we can. . . . We have a common planning time, we have our lunch together, and we know what's happening. . . . We'll try to work that out. (Social Studies Teacher)

Having students arranged into teams and having teachers share large blocks of time daily contributes to the teachers' intimate knowledge of their students. This structural arrangement reinforces the school's approach to realizing that "what you do with those students developmentally is going to determine their academic success" (Principal).

Noticeably absent from the school climate are discipline issues. When the staff is prodded they attribute their success with student management to the team concept, stating, "We stick together. We handle discipline problems with our team. We back each other up. We don't always agree, but we back each other up" (Teacher Focus Group). They describe running the team much like running a small business that requires an overall structure with rules and goals. Teachers also note that they participate in schoolwide professional development on discipline practices that are appropriate for middle school students.

Attending to all Students

Rockcastle County Middle School staff make sure that students know that adults care for them. The students value the attention adults in the school place on taking care of them and tending to their well being. Students feel that adults in their school are open to conversation. They view the school staff as understanding and available. One student describes how he will miss the middle school when he goes to high school because he does not think he will

> get to know the teachers really well because . . . the teachers are going to have so many kids going through. You probably won't have very much time to get to know them as good as you can, like the teachers here in the middle school. (Student Focus Group)

Others state that teachers help them whenever they need it. The school adopts numerous strategies to help the students feel safe and cared for and works to increase the students' academic success. These strategies include paying attention to transition times for the students coming in from elementary school, establishing mentoring programs so students can have close interactions with adults, creating enrichment programs to further reinforce academic skills, and finally, adopting a grading strategy that does not accept student failure.

Helping Students Transition

The school addresses the developmental needs of students with transition programs aimed at assuaging elementary school students' fears about coming to the middle school. One teacher comments,

> Kids come to us in the sixth grade having had two, maybe three teachers, their entire school career. And then they're hit with six or seven of us on a team, plus all the exploratory teachers, plus gym teachers, plus the big building, and it is truly a big transition.

Understanding the anxiety of the fifth-graders, the middle school implements a fifth-grade spring orientation. During the orientation, fifth-graders visit the middle school and middle school teachers visit the elementary schools, asking the students about their concerns and answering questions for them. The middle school assigns the students to their teams and homeroom before the end of their fifth-grade school year so students will not have to go through the summer with anxiety about what will happen the coming fall.

The middle school also implements a buddy program for incoming fifth-graders. Each fifth-grader chooses a friend who will be assigned to his or her homeroom class, meaning they will have physical education and elective classes together as well. This way each student has at least one friend and familiar face when the new school year starts.

In addition to attending to the elementary to middle school transition, Rockcastle County schools also pay attention to the transition from middle school to high school. Similar to the middle school, the high school also operates a summer program to initiate incoming ninth-graders. The schools created this program because staff saw a need:

> The last couple of years they've been working on bridging this program between the eighth grade and the high school. . . . Across the state . . . there's a really high failure rate at the freshman level, and so they've been trying to work on some of that. (Science Teacher)

To further ease the transition from middle to high school, the middle school implemented a schedule similar to a high school schedule: "The schedule was set up to be flexible, to try to assist those middle school students in preparation to go to high school" (Principal). These programs, along with strong curriculum alignment between schools, make sensitive transition periods easier.

Building Relationships

While the school does not have an official mentoring program, staff use an existing portfolio program to fill this role. The Kentucky state assessment requires each seventh-grade student to produce a writing portfolio. The portfolio requirement provides the middle school with an opportunity to advise and guide seventh-grade students. After receiving extensive training in portfolios, each teacher in the school, regardless of what subject he or she teaches, agrees to help four to six students produce their portfolios. This process lasts throughout the year. Teachers use

their planning period to call students in during students' language arts classes. Staff feel this interaction extends beyond academic content and becomes a closer relationship. While the program targets only seventh-grade students, it does provide a structured way to foster more informal and positive interactions between students and teachers.

The school also uses homeroom as way for adults and students to build positive relationships. Homeroom teachers help students keep an agenda book. The agenda books include school rules and policies as well as a place for students to set academic goals. Students also record their daily assignments in these books. Teachers use agenda books to guide conversations about academic expectations and the responsibilities the students have for their own success. These books occupy a prominent place in the school and are used on daily basis to keep track of workloads. Agenda books that are kept current earn students points for end-of-semester rewards. Some teams require parents to sign the books weekly so parents will be aware of student progress.

Providing Enrichment

School staff use several federal programs, such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program[17] and GEAR UP[18], to supplement student support. These programs provide services that address both academic and developmental needs by enabling staff to establish one-on-one relationships with students who would otherwise not be involved in enrichment activities. The programs give students a chance to interact with peers they might not normally meet and gain exposure to colleges and communities outside of the county. As Principal Coffey states, "These programs provide expanded opportunities for these kids to go out, visit areas, have life experiences that they never have had or may never have."

The school's director of 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program describes it as "a lot of things to a lot of people." The program provides enrichment, tutoring, and recreation to students. Although it is open to all students, 21st Century specifically targets students not involved in other enrichment activities by soliciting student names from each teacher and then contacting the students individually. The director sees some of the benefits of the program as being the interaction students get with adults as well as "a good peer model" because students with different levels of academic success work side by side.

The program also engages students through small, academically focused groups that work on projects that culminate in products. For example, the mathematics technology group created a two-dimensional NASCAR prototype by translating a 1/64th scale model into a full-scale model. The language arts group produces the school newspaper.

The GEAR UP program also enhances the school's special student services. GEAR UP's coordinator states that the program seeks to

> work with students who weren't already involved in other things because [research] showed that students who become involved in some sort of extracurricular activity

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[17] The *21st Century Community Learning Center Grants* Program was authorized under Title X, Part I, of the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1994). It was reauthorized in 2001. Grants are targeted to rural and inner-city public elementary or secondary schools. This program provides funding for expanded learning opportunities for participating children in a safe, drug-free and supervised environment. In particular, it supports after-school activities. For more information see http://www.ed.gov/21stcclc/ and http://www.ed.gov/legislation/ESEA/toc.html.

[18] GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) is a part of the 1998 Amendments to Higher Education Act. The mission of GEAR UP is to significantly increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. For more information see http://www.ed.gov/gearup/ and http://www.ed.gov/legislation/HEA/sec403.html.

> by the time they graduate from middle school are the ones that are most likely to stay in school.

The goal of the program is to expose students to higher education and careers that they may not have otherwise known are available. A benefit described by several people at the school is the exposure students are given to real-life opportunities. The coordinator describes a recent trip to visit a college campus. For many of the students it was their first time to stay in a hotel. Another benefit of GEAR UP is the breaking down of social barriers. Much like 21st Century, GEAR UP allows students who may not be high achieving to interact with high-achieving students.

Creating a Safety Net

The school provides structured ways of ensuring middle school students do not experience academic failure. Their grading program helps students become academically responsible. The middle school adopts a no-failure policy. The curriculum specialist describes it as

> a policy that we established from the very beginning. We didn't want to have kids failing. If they were not learning a concept, then they needed to be re-taught so that they would learn that concept.

If a student receives below a 70 in any class at the end of the grading period, the school requires the student to engage in one-on-one tutoring in that subject until the grade is raised to at least a 70. Students come for additional help during their elective or physical education classes. The school also advocates for the schoolwide use of the Extended School Services program that provides after-school time for the students needing additional help. Teachers see this support as an opportunity to give students extra time or present the material in a different way. Students take advantage of these resources using their break time and gym time to catch up or get ahead. They also stay after school a few days a week in the subjects they struggle with until they have passing grades.

Addressing Special Students

Most students with special needs, such as students with learning disabilities, remain a part of the general education classroom. A self-contained room houses students with more severe disabilities. The school and district make a conscious effort to integrate as many students with special needs as possible, and to ensure they receive a challenging curriculum. The district curriculum specialist sees this approach as part of the district's mission:

> We just sort of included [students with learning disabilities] as much as we could. . . . I think that that's something that was real important. We never separated [students] that much except for the things that . . . the law said we had to do, and those kinds of things. And then we just tried to develop good programs for the kids.

Supporting Teachers

School staff realize that if their students are to succeed academically and continue improving, they will need strong academic leaders to help them. The district and school leaders work hard to create an environment where teachers feel valued and respected. They also commit to providing teachers with the resources necessary to be successful. Principal Coffey describes the district as "very supportive in always assisting our school." These resources include help with schoolwide planning, assistance with establishing relationships with individuals and agencies outside the district that could offer support, assistance with building relationships between staff members within the

school, providing resources for high-quality professional development, and providing technical assistance where appropriate.

Fostering Collaboration and Communication

One of the most impressive features of Rockcastle County Middle School is the staff's commitment to collaboration with each other and with outside agencies. Several people say the school is not "afraid to let people come in and help us or give us new ideas" (Teacher Focus Group). School leaders and staff establish an atmosphere of openness to taking risks and trying innovative strategies to help their students improve their performance. The team concept benefits this process by offering teachers a support structure for trying new things in a safe environment. One teacher describes the team concept as being like a family. Because the school is organized around the team concept, teachers shared planning time each day with other members of their teams. The eighty minutes of shared time give them an opportunity to plan their lessons across disciplines, discuss concerns about specific students, ask teammates for help on teaching a certain content strand, meet with parents as a group, and quickly address student needs. These trusting relationships make taking risks accepted and supported.

The middle school's and the district's willingness to collaborate with outside agencies generates much additional support and resources for their teachers. Because the school has "a strong sense of collaboration and a strong sense of doing what's right for the kids," many programs have been brought into the middle school (GEAR UP Coordinator). Some of these programs are available to all schools through state and federal funding, and other programs result from partnerships the district and middle school created. These partnerships lead to increased funding and technical assistance for their school. They provide the middle school with professional development, technology, and improved content resources. Through one partnership, the school receives a teacher partner who supplies ongoing professional development by helping teachers design lessons, modeling teaching strategies, and giving teachers content resources. Other collaborative efforts result in technical assistance to assess and align curriculums with a focus on higher-order thinking skills.

Partnerships with two local colleges provide the middle school with technical assistance on grant writing and ongoing professional development. The colleges use the middle school as an incubator for their student teachers interested in middle school education. Because the college campuses are located near the middle school, the staffs have frequent contact with each other.

Good communication is essential since the school and district partner with so many different agencies. Mr. Coffey states that "the communication has always been good in the district, [and] all communicate regularly so that overlaps do not take place." Much time and energy goes into coordinating all of the different programs at Rockcastle County Middle School so that services are not overlapping. This coordination occurs through both formal and informal planning, such as weekend retreats and "hallway" discussions. The district curriculum director views coordination of the different services as critical to the middle school's being able to identify and meet student needs:

> All these people needed to be communicating so that they were not duplicating [and] there were not unnecessary gaps. So we got the people with the different grants and initiatives together and we talked about where we were, and we talked about how they could complement each other. . . . And that has been a key effort to bring people together and let them talk. District personnel arranged a retreat and meeting times for folks to talk about what services were being offered by whom. They carefully created a consolidated needs plan so that services would not be duplicated. (District Curriculum Director)

With so many services coming together, collaboration and communication are essential for coordinating programs and ensuring their effective and efficient implementation.

Investing in Teachers

Capacity building through professional development and collaboration play a critical role in the improvement of student achievement at Rockcastle County Middle School. Because the district and school value the teachers' time, they compensate them for using additional time to participate in professional development.

Professional development needs are identified by both data and by the teachers themselves. For example, after reviewing recent scores from the past year's Kentucky Core Content Test (KCCT), teachers identified a need for training in how to best teach open-response writing items. The staff then received schoolwide training on this topic. From the training, the teachers collaboratively developed an approach to open-response items that share strategies and terminology across grade levels and content areas. Teachers also receive intensive training on how to teach writing. Because portfolios are part of the KCCT and students' writing scores were low, the middle school formed a partnership with a University of Kentucky writing professor. Teachers take his semester-long class on how to help students write, using their own student writing samples in class.

School evaluations of teachers are seen as another opportunity for individual professional development. By looking at a variety of their student data, teachers can include an area needing strengthening in their professional growth plan. Teachers can then attend professional development in this area and incorporate what they learned into their instruction.

Teachers report that the emphasis placed on capacity building, the flexibility in training selection, and the compensation for their time makes them feel like valued professionals: "We're professionals. We know what we need help in and we know what will help us. . . . We get excited. It's just that opportunity to act as a professional" (Teacher Focus Group). The district and school administration express a strong commitment to making teachers feel valued and respected. They find creative ways of using resources such as Title I and other grants to help afford capacity-building activities. Mr. Coffey describes using available grants and funding sources in conjunction with one another to pay for both professional development and the teachers' time to participate in professional development.

Focusing on Curriculum and Instruction

Rockcastle County Middle School staff focus much of their professional attention and time on critically evaluating their curriculum. These efforts are supported by the direction the state provides through the Kentucky Core Content. As the state refines what they believe students should know, the school district uses this as a guide to hone and align their curricula both within the school and across to the elementary and high school.

The middle school staff commit to working on their own curriculum: "The attitude we ended up with was that curriculum alignment was not a one-time deal; it's an ongoing process and it has to be revisited frequently" (Ex-principal). The school dedicates time and resources to examining their curriculum and eliminating duplication. Several consultants from regional agencies and private organizations are hired by the middle school to evaluate the different content area curricula for alignment between grade levels and alignment with the state standards. These consultants work with teachers to reduce redundant material and adjust the curriculum to better optimize teaching time. For example, some content taught in both seventh- and eighth-grade social studies was redistributed to eliminate overlap, allowing for more in-depth coverage of other topics. One teacher describes working with technical assistance providers "to get a grip on what the kids understand and what

they're misunderstanding, and compare that to what you're teaching. [Teachers] get together and really give our curriculum the once-over" (Science Teacher).

The middle school is also encouraged by the outside consultants to focus their curriculum on higher-order thinking skills. An analysis by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) showed this as an area of weakness for the school's students. The SREB provided technical assistance to help the staff develop curriculum ideas for addressing this need. Teachers also recognized this area as a challenge for them: "The hardest thing that I've found, that we're always reaching for and never quite getting where we really want to be, is that analysis and higher-level thinking" (Teacher Focus Group).

The district and middle school also review curriculum alignment between schools. The district brought in technical assistance from the regional service center to "talk about where the data says we are, and where we think we want to go, and how are we going to get there" (District Curriculum Specialist). The middle school began focusing on better preparation for the high school years. Mr. Coffey views the district as instrumental in this process. District supervisors set up meetings with the elementary schools, middle school, and high school, brought everyone together, provided stipends for teachers to attend, and facilitated conversation around how to provide an aligned K–12 curriculum. Parents note the focus on curriculum alignment between school levels, understanding that what is being taught is "to prepare them to move on to the next level" (Parent Focus Group).

The planning, coordination, and communication that go into providing support for the students and teachers at Rockcastle County Middle School are critical. The attention given to the school's climate, organization, student support strategies, and teacher support strategies help the school focus on achieving its academic goals. School and district staff, parents, and students develop these efforts over time with a long-term vision for their community school.

Story of Change

The school has not always been the recipient of so much positive attention. The 1980 Census reported this district, the Fifth Congressional District, to have the lowest educational achievement level of any of the nation's 435 Congressional Districts.[19] Several school staff spoke of having attended conferences in the past where people would express sympathy for them because they taught in Rockcastle County. When Mr. Hale, the ex-principal of the middle school who is now principal at the high school, was finishing his educational administration certificate at a local university, one of his professors called him to talk about his future plans. He told the professor of his plans to return to Rockcastle County. Through tears, Mr. Hale recalled that his professor told him not to waste his time, that the county was a "dead end."

But Rockcastle County Middle School became a model middle school for the state of Kentucky. These changes occurred because of supportive leaders who were not afraid to share decision making or ask for help, thoughtful planning, collaboration, a dedicated staff, and a commitment to increasing teacher capacity.

Leading with Purpose

Two people in the district took on key leadership positions that were essential to the improvement of the middle school. In the late 1980s, a progressive superintendent came to the district. The new superintendent had a vision for change and a clear resolution that the district could

[19] Mountain Association for Community Economic Development, *Would you like to swing on a star? [Report]* (Berea, KY: Mountain Association for Community Economic Development, 1986).

improve. He created an atmosphere where people could feel good about both trying and failing: "One of the things that he talked about often was that even though they would fail, if you were trying some new things, it was all right if you did something wrong" (District Curriculum Specialist). Additionally, as a result of state school finance litigation, the Kentucky legislators passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) that dramatically changed how schools were financed and laid the groundwork for statewide standards with aligned curricula and assessments. Rockcastle County greatly benefited from the refinancing from KERA. It gave the district the opportunity to build a new high school and create a middle school in the existing high school. The belief was that a middle school would allow for more programs and opportunities than would otherwise be available if the district remained in its current K–8 configuration.

Consolidating grades 6 through 8 into a middle school meant closing one of the existing K–8 schools. This action was strongly rejected by the community surrounding the school that would be closed. Fears were assuaged and support gained when the district hosted "town meetings" to get community input. Once the difficult decision was made to move to the middle school model, the next step was to select a principal. Because of the changes a middle school would mean for the community, the district knew they would need a strong leader. The district Title I director stated,

> When we moved in to the consolidated concept, we really needed a strong leader that would take us beyond personalities and get on with educating kids and being educators in the middle school concept . . . [someone] that was able to look at us and see our value and our worth and guide us toward proficiency.

The district and school found the leader they needed for this challenge in John Hale, a principal at the largest elementary school. They felt that he had the necessary temperament and vision to unify the community.

The community, teachers, and students were nervous about moving to the middle school model. The K–8 schools had strong cultures and identities. Closing one elementary school and creating the middle school meant the loss of the existing culture and the challenge of building a new identity. The principal felt that giving people input would lessen their concerns about moving to the middle school. Community members and teachers were asked to be on different committees, such as a discipline committee and a budget committee, that would decide how the school was set up and run. He viewed the inclusion of many people in decision making as essential to the school's success. The principal stated, "When you have authority, you have responsibility. When you share authority, you share responsibility." While he admitted that some might describe his leadership style as aggressive, he says he gave teachers a lot of ownership and decision making power. Others agreed that he provided strong leadership through sharing power.

Teachers mentioned the ownership and accountability they felt for the students' performance because of their decision making power and input about how to structure the middle school and the curriculum:

> People were just in awe of the flexibility we had. And I think that was a big catalyst to getting us off to a successful start—people being able to make the decisions. Power was placed in the teachers' hands to make the decisions they needed to make for the kids. (Science Teacher)

The school made most decisions through their site-based decision making team that operated from the premise that if what was being proposed was good for the students, then it was good for the school.

Planning a True Middle School

The district and community had one year to plan for the new middle school. Through much deliberation, the community decided on a "true middle school" model. The principal then began studying the research on middle schools and working with the Kentucky Department of Education. Around that time, the Kentucky Department of Education was following the middle school model described in the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century.*[20] The principal invited teachers from each elementary school, parents, and other community members to share information about the model and help decide if it would work for them. Together, they decided the model made sense: "He did the research and we had to decide whether we were going to be a traditional middle [school] or go the group way" (Exploratory Teacher).

Part of the work that went into the creation of the middle school included organizational decisions to make the school run more smoothly. The staff decided to implement the Turning Points model and arranged the school in grade-level teams so teachers shared a group of students. They planned flexible scheduling so that each grade had different release schedules. This scheduling prevented classes releasing at the same time and the halls filling with students and noise. It meant that younger students did not often interact with older students. The flexible scheduling also allowed teachers more freedom to teach. If one teacher's lesson needed more time, that teacher could make arrangements with the team. The schedule also built in eighty minutes of shared planning each day for team teachers.

The middle school staff discussed the challenge of being asked to make many changes in a short amount of time. Staff also talked about the difficulties of bringing together teachers from the three elementary schools, which each had a different culture and belief system. Some of the staff in that first year were not willing to make the changes they were being asked to make, like working on teams, working more, and increasing the academic rigor of the school. The principal felt that everyone deserved at least two years to adjust to the new conditions since it was such a change from what they were used to. After, the second year, however, he and his staff reevaluated if Rockcastle was the right school and the right setting for everyone. Some staff chose not to return, others were not invited to return, and others who stayed but were not as supportive of the new direction the school was going were placed in positions on the staff where they would have minimal impact on the students. As new positions came open at the middle school, the staff emphasized finding people with middle school certification so that there would be some assurance that they were "trained for middle school and that they obviously wanted to be there" (District Curriculum Specialist). These additions strengthened the school.

Seeking Help

Opening the middle school took people down a new path. The leaders and staff knew they would want help with the decisions ahead of them. The school took advantage of several unique opportunities. Because of the high poverty and low literacy rates in the county, its schools were eligible for and aggressively pursued grants and outside partnerships. Some of these partnerships were the result of federal and state efforts, such as Title I and KERA. The middle school used Title I dollars to support a schoolwide program that supplied each of the middle school's six grade-level teams with an additional resource teacher. Title I dollars were also used to help support professional development. Other funding and support came about because of district efforts to increase contact

20 Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. 1989. Turning points: Preparing American youth for the 21st century. Washington, DC: Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development.

with outside agencies. The superintendent especially nurtured relationships with nearby colleges—Berea College and Eastern Kentucky University.

Examples of state and federal programs available to all campuses were the Youth Service Center[21] and the Migrant Education Program.[22] The Youth Service Center provided counseling and home visit services for youth in the county. Because the program was housed in the middle school, the middle school students were very visible to the Youth Service Center staff, who gave them extra attention. Migrant Education Program staff visited the parents of struggling students who had recently moved into the county. The program also offered general support to students and parents by increasing their awareness of local programs open to them. The school used Migrant Education Program funds to help support the portfolio program by purchasing more word processors for the language arts department. These programs allowed the school to extend its borders beyond the traditional school day and beyond the traditional school building.

Forward in the Fifth was a state program aimed at Kentucky's Fifth Congressional District. The state provided help to improve professional development, technology, and content in its schools. This effort came about as a result of Rockcastle County having the lowest high school graduation rate in the nation for the 1980 census.

Three other partnerships were instrumental in helping Rockcastle County Middle School support its students and teachers: the Appalachia Rural Systemic Initiative (ARSI), the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and local colleges. ARSI, funded by the National Science Foundation, chose the middle school because of the region's income levels. The program created a teacher partner position at the middle school that provided onsite and ongoing professional development related to curriculum and instruction for the mathematics and science teachers. The teacher partner received technical assistance from ARSI and was then able to work one-on-one with teachers, developing lessons, modeling teaching strategies, and serving as a general resource. SREB partnered with Rockcastle County Middle School because of its high rate of poverty and its improving academic scores. SREB provided technical assistance to better align curricula across grade levels and to increase the emphasis on higher-order thinking skills at the middle grades. Local colleges partnered with the school in a variety of ways, from individual professors developing relationships with schools for ongoing and intensive professional development to colleges of education making arrangements to place student teachers with their school.

These partnerships helped provide the middle school with technical assistance for writing grants and providing high-quality, ongoing professional development. School staff saw these relationships and services as essential in the school's later successes.

Training Teachers

The staff realized that the middle school concept of addressing both the academic and developmental needs of the students was new to many teachers who did not have a specialization in middle grades education. The school tried to "give professional development opportunities that were sustained over time. We tried to avoid quick fixes, and we tried to let teachers see research-based programs and efforts" (District Title I Coordinator). Schoolwide professional development

[21] The Family Resource and Youth Service Center program was established by the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990. The primary goal of this program is to remove non-cognitive barriers to student's learning.

[22] The Migrant Education Program (MEP) is authorized under Part C of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended. It helps ensure that migrant children access and benefit from both basic school services and current education reform and school improvement initiatives. For more information see http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/MEP/programs.html.

was geared toward learning more about the developmental needs of students at this age level. Much of the Turning Points literature addressed these issues. The school also participated in programs such as Discipline with Dignity. School staff committed to specifically addressing the academic needs of their students through ongoing, high-quality instructional training. All teachers worked with an Eastern Kentucky University writing professor to learn how to better teach writing skills to their students across content areas. After intensive training, the school adopted learning-centered classroom instruction as a schoolwide model.

Reflecting on those early years, school staff recalled the difficulty of starting over: "We struggled to come together as a team. Everybody was still kind of doing their own individual thing" (Mathematics Teacher). Teachers wished they had another year of planning so that they could have aligned their curricula. Instead, they went through their first year with four separate curricula they brought over from their elementary schools. Over the years, curriculum alignment has been a critical focus of the school. They again have been open to outside help and have called on their many partnerships for technical assistance with aligning their curricula.

Moving Forward

While the staff at Rockcastle County Middle School have made much progress, they continue to focus efforts on areas of need: "We're always striving to be better. We just know we've got to. We're all here for the children. And if we can be better, we can teach the children more" (Teacher Focus Group). The Turning Points middle school model adopted by Rockcastle recommends a mentoring component where each student was linked with an adult. This is an area with which school staff still struggle. In practice, they use the seventh-grade portfolio program where each teacher works closely with four to six students throughout the year. These interactions foster a strong relationship between the adults and students but are limited to one grade level.

Teachers also express a need to increase their emphasis on more critical thinking skills. They struggle to help their students engage in higher-level thinking. To address this issue, the school is using outside consultants to assess their curricula and provide discussion time and professional development around this issue.

Mr. Hale describes how the district's reputation has improved: "When I go to meetings now, they look for me. And they want to talk to me about what we've done. It's a very rewarding experience." Rockcastle County Middle School has made a tremendous amount of progress and growth over the past several years through a very planned and deliberate effort involving input from both district and campus levels. The willingness of this staff to critically examine their work, acknowledge areas of need, and seek help is a credit to them as professionals.

Tonasket Middle School

Tonasket Public School District

Tonasket, Washington

Tonasket Middle School

Tonasket, Washington

Tonasket, population 1,010, is located in Okanogan County, Washington, a scenic, rural area that lies approximately twenty miles south of the Canadian border. Tonasket is named after the chief of the Okanogan tribe of Native Americans that originally inhabited the region. The closest national airport is in Spokane, approximately 160 miles—and four hours—away. Two state highways, Highway 20 and Highway 97, are the major thoroughfares through town. The junction where these two highways meet has become a major commercial hub in the community. Local residents and travelers alike converge at this busy intersection that includes a gas station, a car wash, a country store, a laundry, and a motel. Tonasket Middle School—at the edge of town—lies just a five-minute walk away from the junction.

The economy of the Tonasket region largely depends on the production of agricultural and natural resources, especially the apple industry. Early settlers planted the first apple trees in 1861. Today the Okanogan Valley is lined with orchards. When the worldwide apple market crashed in 1999, the impact was devastating for the region. Many family-operated orchards were forced to close after inexpensive apple imports from non-industrial countries caused prices to drop sharply.[23] Two of the three largest apple warehouses were shut down, and hundreds of acres of orchards were bulldozed to avoid attracting insects to the untended trees.

Today, Okanogan County ranks as the state's poorest county, with an average annual income of less than $15,000 per worker. The local unemployment rate of 12.7 percent is almost twice as high as the state average.[24] Despite the best efforts of the local chamber of commerce, employment options have continued to dwindle. Fliers are posted everywhere announcing low-rent housing opportunities subsidized by federal housing aid. Lacking financial capital, some families even take shelter in old school buses and travel trailers that hardly protect them from the difficult winter months.

State Context

In the early 1990s, the Washington legislature overhauled the state's educational system. This process resulted in the establishment of the Washington State Assessment System, composed of three broad programs: statewide testing, classroom-based assessments, and assessment of staff development. These are driven by higher academic content standards that were developed to represent the specific academic skills and knowledge students are required to meet in the classrooms. These Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs)[25] consist of benchmarks and broad achievement indicators for the state, districts, schools, and individual students. They are linked to the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), a set of standards based tests that are at the center of the statewide testing program. The WASL currently is comprised of a series of criterion-referenced tests in reading, writing, listening, and mathematics at grades 4, 7, and 10. In addition, science tests in grades 8 and 10 are being field tested. These standards-based assessments

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[23] L.V. Mapes, "Apple growers are calling it quits. The apple crash. High yields, foreign competition knock small operators out of the business," *The Seattle Times*, 1999 October 3, p. A1.

[24] This information was provided by the Tonasket Works Department and the Tonasket Chamber of Commerce.

[25] For more information see http://www.k12.wa.us/curriculuminstruct/ealrs.asp, accessed 14 June 2002.

incorporate three item types: selected response, short constructed response, and extended constructed response.

There are two other components that include a series of commercially available, nationally norm-referenced tests—the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and the Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED). The ITBS at grades 3 and 6 and the ITED at grade 9 comprise the nationally norm-referenced component of the statewide testing program. These measures ensure that the state collects achievement information about the basic skills that provide the foundation for the application and problem solving skills found in the EALRs. Results of these tests are reported disaggregated by ethnicity and gender in a readily accessible form at *www.k12.wa.us/edprofile*.

School Demographics

Although the Tonasket School District has served the largest geographical area of any district in the state (1,600 square miles), it has only one elementary school (grades 1–5), one middle school (grades 6–8), and one high school (grades 9–12). During the 2000–01 school year, the middle school served 277 students. Approximately 80 percent of these students were white, and 17 percent were Hispanic. Migrant workers from Mexico had originally been attracted to the region to work in the apple orchards. Many of these migrants workers have since settled in the area, and a few families have purchased their own orchards.

Table 12: Tonasket Middle School Student Demographics

Demographic Factors	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Enrolled	318	291	277
White	79.2%	81.1%	80.5%
Hispanic	18.2%	16.5%	16.6%
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Participation	59.6%	58.2%	64.2%

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Student Achievement

Tonasket Middle School showed significant improvements in student performance in 1998–99 and maintained a high level of performance in 1999–2000. Scores for the state-administered test, the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), showed that Tonasket seventh-graders outperformed their peers by several percentage points in reading and mathematics—a big jump from the extremely low passing rate the first year the WASL was administered in 1997–98. Because of its exemplary school performance, Tonasket Middle School was chosen in 2001 to participate in a statewide study about best practices in high-performing middle schools.

Table 13: Tonasket Middle School Seventh-Graders' Performance on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning

Year	Passing rate: Reading		Passing rate: Mathematics	
	School	State	School	State
1997–98	32.1	38.4	16.5	20.1
1998–99	44.2	40.8	36.5	24.2

Year	Passing rate: Reading		Passing rate: Mathematics	
	School	State	School	State
1999–2000	41.8	41.5	29.0	28.2
2000–01	32.2	39.8	25.3	27.4
Growth 97/98–99/00	30.2	8.1	75.8	40.3
Growth 97/98–00/01	0.3	3.6	53.3	36.3

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

The test scores reported for 2000–01, however, reflect mixed results. Tonasket's sixth-grade average percentile rank on a nationally norm-referenced test—the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) has steadily improved over time and has almost reached the state average in 2001 (see Table 3). But Tonasket's seventh-grade reading and mathematics scores on the state-administered WASL have experienced a dip that the school is currently responding to. This dip is also reflected on the state level to a lesser degree. The current fluctuation may be explained by the smaller sample size of students tested or a shift of educational resources that is discussed later in this case study.

Table 14: Tonasket Middle School Sixth-Graders' Performance on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Year	Percentile rank: Reading		Percentile rank: Mathematics	
	School	State	School	State
1998–99	36	52	54	56
1999–2000	44	54	55	56
2000–01	52	53	54	56
Growth 98/99–00/01	**16**	**1**	**0**	**0**

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Portrait of the School

The middle school is located in a picturesque mountain setting, and it is still surrounded by snow through mid-spring. Weather reports are constantly monitored to determine whether mountain passes and roadways will be open each day for school buses and cars to travel. Some students spend hours on the bus each day. While students' homes are scattered throughout an area that is the size of the state of Rhode Island, they are part of a close-knit community: Tonasket Middle School. In fact, this interconnectedness emerges as a main characteristic of Tonasket Middle School. Frequent interactions take place between the teachers, support staff, and school administrators, and with other schools, district personnel, and outside entities. These interactions form a net of mutual support that affects the school climate and the school's students and teachers.

Creating a Positive School Climate

One teacher characterizes the school as a puzzle where all of the different pieces fit together. Each staff member plays a unique role and openly acknowledges the importance of individual differences and the contributions of the others. Randall Hauff, the superintendent of Tonasket School District, points out the unique role of Tonasket Middle School in the district: "I think that

the [school's] strength in the district is its ability to work together as a unit." The skill and ability of all staff working together and supporting each other is visible throughout Tonasket Middle School. According to the school's vision statement, this close-knit support system is intended to help "facilitate the process of students learning how to learn." Students talk about getting academic help from their teachers. They also talk about getting emotional support:

> You're, like, having a bad day or having a hard time with something . . . at this school here, like if somebody's mad at you, you would go to the teacher and they'll help you out, or the counselor or principal and tell them what's going on. . . . They'll always help you out with what to do in some respect or something. (Student Focus Group)

The school's climate of support extends throughout all areas of need. This support is contagious. One student, for example, shares a story about a friend of hers who has moved to a different district and "does not like the [new] school that much because they don't help her out at all. They just like give her the assignment and she's lost. So I email her and I try to help her out and stuff."

The middle school's connectedness can partly be attributed to the fact that all of the school buildings and administrative offices are clustered together on a single "district campus" site. Although the middle school and the high school actually share the same two-story brick building, they maintain their separate identities through the architectural design. The elementary school is located in an adjacent building. Administrative district offices overlook the whole campus. The Title I district director states that to her the whole district feels like "one campus." The closeness of the facilities allows her to have her office in the elementary school, where she can feel closer to the students. Having a single campus allows the middle school staff members to work closely with district-level personnel, as well as staff from the elementary and high schools. Through frequent interactions, the visions of the three principals neatly fit together, and this ultimately benefits students because it makes their transition between the schools easier. District administrators like the Title I director regularly attend faculty meetings. School and district administrators have weekly meetings and also stay in touch throughout the week. Ed Morgan, the middle school's principal, has a "direct line" to the superintendent and calls him to deal with developing issues immediately. The geographical closeness of the schools is surely an advantage, but, as a teacher states, not a sufficient condition for any school to work as a unit to support student success. In a teacher's own words:

> Other schools that I observed, it wasn't anything like this. This is really a unique group and I don't know if it's because we're in a small town—actually that's not true because I did work in a small town. . . . It's just a unique group of middle school people." (Teacher-d)

Attending to all Students

Students are aware of the support structures that are in place to help them, and they feel free to use the services that are offered. Staff interactions with students are multidimensional, addressing behavioral, academic, and affective components. This holistic approach provides a rich understanding of each individual student and ensures that students receive prompt attention for any problems they are experiencing.

Building Relationships

Teachers are concerned about understanding their students' needs and building interpersonal relationships. Students, in turn, recognize the importance of developing close working relationships

with their teachers. Although there is no formal mentoring process in place, teachers are able to address their students' needs through a variety of informal and formal channels.

The quickest and easiest informal way for teachers to obtain information about students is to go to the teachers' lunchroom during the thirty-four-minute lunch period. All teachers and students share the same lunch period. During this time, teachers talk to each other about helping struggling students. A teacher describes lunch as a time to share background information about students:

> Back in the lunch room, I can't tell you how many times we have said, "Oh, boy, this kid is having a lot of trouble." It is just an informal time for us to talk: "He is having trouble in my class too." "Oh, in my class too, and you know what I found out? His mother has cancer." "No kidding! Oh, my god. Okay, let's see if we can help this kid." (Teacher-b)

Teachers also confer about how to help academically successful students excel, such as placing an exceptional mathematics student into a more advanced class.

When a more formal analysis is required, teachers turn to the school counselor. The counselor first meets with the teacher alone to discuss the situation and then visits with the student's other teachers to get their perspectives. With this information in hand, she determines whether the student needs counseling, tutoring, or some other service. At that point, the counselor may involve the Child Study Team (CST) if the circumstances are out of the ordinary or require special resources. Team members include the principal, the students' teachers, the counselor, the family empowerment specialist,[26] the special education director, the Title I director, and the director of the Learning and Support Center, among others. The CST meets every Tuesday to address the needs of two or three individual students. While other campuses have CSTs as well, at Tonasket "it's been a real strong thing" (Teacher-b). The goal is that "we really try to catch them so they do not fall between the cracks" (Counselor). The CST members pool ideas, develop plans, and put these plans into action. Sometimes, their plan involves referring the student to counseling services; other times, it means covering a student's basic needs, such as ensuring personal hygiene, obtaining clothes or writing paper, or even taking the student out of an abusive situation. Team members contact each other whenever they need to resolve other issues that might arise between formal meetings.

Helping Students Transition

The teachers work as a team to make the transition from fifth grade (elementary school) to the sixth grade (middle school) as easy as possible. To preserve some of the intimate classroom setting from elementary school, the three sixth-grade teachers are organized in an interdisciplinary team sharing all sixth-grade students. This structure allows the sixth-grade teachers get to know the students from the other two teachers' classes as well. Although this means that teachers actually spend less time with each individual student, teachers feel this is a win-win situation because they have a constant connection with the kids, and they have the chance to know every sixth-grader on campus. By obtaining the elementary school test data of sixth-graders, the teachers are able to analyze the skill level of each incoming student in order to emphasize certain areas and to lay a strong foundation on which students can build as they move through the grades.

The three sixth-grade teachers meet regularly so that they can identify struggling students as soon as possible. They especially appreciate early morning meetings, when they can meet without interruption: "So we're always talking about what we need to do for this student. 'Are you having

[26] The family empowerment specialist is a districtwide position and has the role of helping the student's family get access to social services such as federal food stamps or subsidized housing.

trouble with this student?' 'How can we benefit this student? What do we need to do to make him succeed?' " (Teacher-d). They also take advantage of the one-hour common preparation time in the early afternoon after the middle school has released the students for the day. The teachers use this time to evaluate their students' work and to plan their curriculum together. Each sixth-grade teacher prepares one-third of the individual units to be covered and then shares them with the other two teachers. As a result, teachers have reduced their individual workloads while improving the quality of each lesson plan. By sharing lesson plans this way, they introduce the same materials to every student to ensure consistency. Teachers still allocate their class time and energy as they feel best and teach the lessons in their unique style.

Focusing on Curriculum

Teachers work hard to align the curriculum and provide a consistent academic focus. In an effort to determine which areas are most in need of improvement for the whole school, teachers analyze scores on the statewide tests. For example, by examining WASL scores, the teachers discovered that their students did poorly in interpreting graphs and pictorial images. They decided that every teacher would focus on how to read graphs rather than leave it up to the mathematics teacher only. This helped students see that concepts from one subject area could be applied to other subject areas. The teachers' efforts proved to be worthwhile when students' scores started to show improvement.

Another example of ensuring consistency is the districtwide implementation of a new writing strategy called the Steps Essay, named after the different steps of writing and initiated by a teacher on the middle school campus. The technique is a modified form of paragraph writing and is intended to help students organize their thoughts and write them down clearly by starting with a thesis, developing the arguments, and ending with a conclusion. Once the strategy had proved to be successful for middle school students, it was shared with elementary and high school students. As a result, students have picked up this writing process early. Teachers benefit from this districtwide effort because they can build on the foundation that has been laid earlier and go into more depth, like teaching how to integrate quotations in an essay. In addition, teachers outside of language arts benefit because they can also assign Steps Essays to their students. The counselor explains that once the students understand the format, the teachers are "free to become more creative within the format."

Valuing Respect

Because the principal and teachers consistently model and require respect, students on campus behave appropriately. The school's discipline policy reinforces interacting with respect. The students believe that discipline is handled fairly, and they clearly understand their boundaries. They know that consequences are guaranteed to follow inappropriate behavior. A teacher recalls an incident when two students misbehaved in the hallway. The teacher promptly gave each student two days of lunch detention. Several days later, the teacher was surprised to hear that the students already served their detentions—even though he had not yet submitted the paperwork to the principal's office.

Tonasket Middle School staff believe that having students reflect on their inappropriate behavior is the first step toward improving behavior. When students are disruptive in class, teachers issue Behavior Improvement Forms (BIFs). With their BIFs in hand, the students are sent to another classroom to reflect on their predicament for approximately fifteen minutes. During that time, the students write about why they behaved the way they did. For example, they might have been trying to get attention, or they might have been challenging the teacher's authority. Students then must state whether the outcome is what they have hoped it would be. Next, they are asked how

they would handle the situation differently in the future. Students and teachers both sign off on the BIF.

Looking Beyond Middle School

The middle school cooperates with the high school to offer a college/career exploration lab class for their eighth-grade students. This allows students to formulate their secondary education plans. This program is funded by a grant that also provides scholarships for high school graduates. The librarian who teaches this class organizes trips for students to visit nearby universities. Eighth-graders are aware that the scholarships provided by the grant can give them the opportunity to go to college:

> And we have a class now in the eighth grade that we have to take, called "College Awareness," in which we learn about the scholarship because it's such a good chance for us to get out of Tonasket and go to a big college. (Student Focus Group)

Because the scholarships are competitive, students know that they have to work hard. Although some parents are surprised when their eighth-graders talk about the college awareness program, they agree that it is not too early to start planning for the future. The principal emphasizes that an early start is especially important in a community where it is not the norm for students to go on to college.

Supporting Teachers

The middle school teachers explain that they are given professional autonomy and the necessary resources to teach their students effectively. In particular, teachers feel that they are treated as professionals, and are able to make essential decisions, share expertise, and capitalize on resources.

Understanding Teachers as Professionals

Teachers feel that they are treated as professionals by the middle school principal and the superintendent. The principal constantly provides encouraging feedback to them. One teacher says that it makes a world of difference to teachers when they feel that they are valued and their efforts are considered worthwhile. Because the principal clearly values the teachers' time, he provides stipends whenever possible when he asks teachers to commit extra time for special projects. For example, the teachers were paid when they came in before school to work on aligning the curriculum with the state standards. One teacher states that although it is only an hour of pay each time, "it was just the notion that your time has some value. Being paid gives people a feeling of being valued" (Teacher Focus Group). The principal knows that his staff are dedicated and work more than their contracts require—"more than they need to put in."

Sharing Decision making

Teachers are especially pleased when administrators ask for their advice and then take their suggestions seriously. The teachers feel comfortable making decisions that they are ultimately responsible for implementing in the classrooms. Overall, the staff appreciates that most of the decisions are made jointly. Teachers feel that many of the positive changes in the district have originated from their ideas. They explain how they have ownership of what happens at the school:

> Things have become ours—many things have become our decision to make. And we make those as a group. You know, [the principal] leads us in that direction maybe a

> lot of times, but we end up figuring it out somehow and . . . it happens that way. (Teacher Focus Group)

For example, teachers initiated the establishment of the Discovery Room, a program that provides one-on-one tutoring and other academic support when students show the first signs of low performance. A teacher recalls that the Discovery Room was "one of the first things, I think, that we . . . took control. Here's a problem we have, let's solve it" (Teacher Focus Group). The teachers were able to convince the administration to fund the program.

Because teachers have a vested interest in the school's future, they feel responsible for the school's financial and academic status. It is not surprising that the entire school worked on a grant application. The principal and teachers met on Saturdays to prepare a proposal for a grant that recognized high-achieving schools and provided funding for restructuring. They did not hire a professional grant writer for the project because they felt that they had the expertise to prepare the application themselves. It was motivational for them to work on the application as a team.

In this context, they developed a statement of the current strengths and weaknesses of the school. In order to assess where the school was, the middle school administered a climate survey in the fall of 2001. Students were asked about what they liked about their school and what they would change. Using the survey results, the staff identified strengths and weaknesses of their school, as well as strategies that demonstrated the school's commitment to a common focus, high expectations, personalized climate, respect and responsibility, time to collaborate, performance-based student support, and technology as a tool.[27] Even if the school does not receive the grant, their collaborative efforts were not wasted because the process helped them to develop a comprehensive plan for the future.

Sharing Professional Expertise

Professional development at the middle school is both determined by and provided by teachers. The teachers agree among themselves that "instead of always looking for someone else to 'fix' our problem, [we] would work within the school to solve . . . problems" (Teacher Survey). Teachers realize that they already have professional expertise and it is only a matter of finding a way to share the information with each other. When teachers attend external conferences to get new ideas, they make a point of sharing their new knowledge with their colleagues on site.

For example, one teacher became acquainted with the theory of multiple intelligences[28] and shared it with her colleagues. She found support particularly from the teachers who had recently done graduate work in education. Soon other teachers began to see how the theory could be an effective tool, and started using various methods to accommodate students' different learning styles. This focus on individual student capabilities has even been incorporated into the school's vision statement: "Recognize the multiple intelligences students use in learning, teach to these intelligences, and provide appropriate evaluation of each." Students are aware that a variety of mechanisms are in place to ensure that they are able to grasp the material being presented.

Teachers circulate books and discuss related issues with their colleagues. For example, since the new statewide assessment has been introduced, teachers constantly acquire and exchange

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[27] These areas were identified by the grantor as seven attributes of high-performing schools.

[28] Based on cultural contexts, biological analysis, developmental theories, and a vertical theory of faculties, multiple intelligence theory identifies seven intelligences: linguistic, logical mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. For more information, see H. Gardner, "The theory of multiple intelligences," *Annals of Dyslexia* 37 (1987): 19-35.

information about different assessment methods. They read widely to learn to use various types of assessments in their own classrooms to help students apply what they have learned.[29]

Building Resources

The close relationship between school and district administrators results in shared resources that are distributed effectively. To find out about the current needs and to distribute funds accordingly, the Title I director is constantly rotating between campuses, communicating with the elementary, middle, and high school staff. In her view, her efforts on working closely with the schools and staying up to date pay off: "I'm right there to know what is going on with . . . things. So I think you can make more informed decisions."

Additionally, as a member of the district's administrative team, the Title I director helps to develop the district's administrative plan. Therefore, she has comprehensive knowledge of what funding sources are available and how flexible these sources are. In charge of other funding sources such as migrant, learning assistance, and bilingual programs as well, the Title I director coordinates and combines these funds. By cross-funding, she ensures that effective learning programs are funded and holes are filled where a funding source has expired.

The Title I director pushed for schoolwide Title I funding at the middle school. Instead of having staff and resources dedicated to individual students, she believes that the money can best be used "for the good of all kids" (Title I Director). In the past, the computer lab funded by Title I was open only to Title I students. Having schoolwide funding now makes it possible for teachers to integrate the computer lab as a classroom resource that is available for all students.

Tonasket Middle School is a place where people interact with one another to help students succeed. The middle school is more than a static "puzzle" where all pieces fit together, it is an organic network to benefit students. Students feel that they have their own place in this world. A student summarizes it as follows: "What I like about this school is: It is warm. All teachers are nice to me. I have a lot of friends, and my teachers think I'm smart—just about everything is good in this school" (Student Survey).

Story of Change

When comparing the middle school as it stands today with the school as it existed eight years ago, the superintendent describes it as being like "two different worlds." Making such a radical change was a shared effort that involved administrators, teachers, support staff members, students, parents, and the community as a whole.

Throughout the years, several critical incidents took place. First, a new superintendent was hired. Second, a new middle school building was constructed. Third, a new middle school principal was hired. Fourth, legislative changes were enacted. The middle school managed to use each of these events to its own advantage. Over time, Tonasket Middle School staff built an effective school that gained recognition from the community for its achievements.

Surviving in the Old Building

In the mid-1990s, the middle school and the elementary school had the dubious distinction of sharing what was literally recognized as "the worst facility in the state" (Teacher Focus Group). Teachers, parents, and students all have stories to tell because memories are still vivid. Dozens of garbage cans and containers barricaded the classrooms and hallways to collect the rainwater because

[29] One book some teachers have relied on is Richard J. Stiggins, *Student-Involved Classroom Assessment*, 3rd ed., Prentice Hall: New Jersey 2000.

the roof leaked. Students constantly moved their desks to stay dry when snow was melting on the roof. An art teacher remembers when the ceiling collapsed and water poured down all over her. To make matters worse, the school was overcrowded. The Title I teacher tutored students in the hallway because there were no classrooms available. When portable buildings were added, teachers were eager to move to those facilities because they had such amenities as heating and air conditioning, even though they had no phones or running water.

Because student discipline was a problem, vandalism of school property soon followed. The counselor attributes the discipline problems to the message sent out by the desolate facilities: "You know when you've got to put garbage cans in your room to catch water, . . . it sends a message." Because there was no consistent discipline policy in place, teachers were left on their own to handle problems as best they could. A good teacher was considered to be any teacher who was able to maintain control of her classroom.

Declining Teacher Morale

Teacher morale was low. Teachers felt that they were not trusted or supported by the school principal. Teachers felt that whenever they attempted to introduce new ideas, such as printing a student newspaper or using new reading materials, their ideas were ignored. Teachers responded by simply "giving up." They either accepted this lack of freedom and remained very textbook-oriented, or they "hunkered down" in their classrooms and concentrated on their own business.

Teachers also shut their doors to protect themselves from their colleagues. Bickering and backstabbing were commonplace. Teachers described a pocket of teachers who resisted any new ideas. Teachers recalled one person who consistently discouraged them from trying new things, because they would not get paid any more, regardless of what they did.

Failing Students

Many students "slipped through the cracks" (Teacher Focus Group). Although many students did not do passing work, they were promoted to the next grade level. While teachers did not support the practice of social promotion, they knew that retaining large numbers of students was not a realistic alternative either. The school did not have a consistent structure in place to support failing students, and resources were not being used effectively. For example, teacher aides did not have clear responsibilities and were scattered throughout the building.

The school did not have a culture of academics. Students ridiculed their classmates who did well academically. The school day was filled with non-core electives and activities, such as origami. Teachers complained that their class periods were constantly being interrupted for administrative matters. Students were pulled from core classes to attend school assemblies.

Leading with Purpose

Although Tonasket Middle School teachers recognized the need for drastic changes years ago, they were aware that an overhaul of the status quo would be an extensive process. It involved the hiring of new administrators for the district and the school, and the construction of a new facility.

Envisioning a New District

Teachers agree that the starting point for the overall change process was the hiring of a new superintendent. Before coming to Tonasket ten years ago, Randall Hauff had already established a positive track record in education. In 1983 the middle school where he served as principal was one of the first schools in the country to receive the federal Excellence in Education Award. The teachers believe that the superintendent came to Tonasket with a long-range vision of what the

district could become—a vision that included a middle school with a unified staff, strong administrative leadership, and a new facility.

Mr. Hauff says that he envisioned the district as an organic system in which leaders had a facilitative role to make sure that schools and teachers had the resources "to accomplish what they needed to accomplish." He believes that administrators also serve a supportive role, whereby they assist teachers in their common effort toward the goals of promoting student learning and fostering high expectations.

The superintendent went out into the community to promote his vision for the district. He was able to focus his attention on district policies and priorities, rather than on day-to-day management issues, by delegating tasks and hiring professionals to manage the details, such as developing the school budget. Although he delegated tasks, he continued to exert steady control in the background. His influence remained constant, although he did not personally sit on all of the various committees.

Building Consensus

Although no one doubted that a new school facility was needed, the district tried, but failed to pass bond issues for a new construction for twenty years. With such a diverse population in the community, it was difficult to gain the support of the required 60 percent of the voters. The list of registered voters in Tonasket included a wide range of interests. The superintendent described the range as: "retirees," "lumbermen," "cattlemen," "hippies from the 1960s," "environmentalists," and "Vietnam veterans," among others. Voters hesitated to add an additional financial burden because the region was already economically strained. Some families were not interested in a new facility because they preferred home schooling.

Soon after he arrived in Tonasket, the superintendent started an aggressive outreach program to promote community support for the district. Parents remember that there was a lot of publicity about building new school facilities. He selected individuals who opposed his ideas to serve on committees. These individuals ultimately were convinced to become supporters. The superintendent addressed their fears about the impact that the financial burden would have on individual taxpayers. He made them understand that the local tax burden would be reduced because state and federal funding had become available for the construction of new facilities. Finally, the superintendent's efforts paid off and the bond issue passed. It took another two years for the new facilities to be built.

The community's perception of the school district changed dramatically after the construction project was completed. The new building brought a new climate and a change in attitudes. Residents became proud of the new building and the investment they had made with their dollars. The students and staff members liked the new building and felt a sense of ownership. The students applied peer pressure to keep the building clean. An eighth-grader states, "Most students here have been taking pretty good care of the school. Like, nobody really beats up on it or does graffiti; people get on their case" (Student Focus Group). In 2002, despite its six years of age, the middle school building still looks brand new. Looking back, one teacher expresses poignantly,

> I'd have to say facilities really have made a big difference in everybody's attitude, even the community's attitude about the school. And it's given us a certain level of respectability that we didn't have. Just the facility itself. (Teacher-c)

Creating a Shared Identity

Soon after the bonds had passed for the new middle school building, the middle school principal left. The teachers realized that they had an opportunity for a totally new start—with new

facilities and a new principal. The superintendent allowed the teachers to work as a group to decide who was to be hired.

The group decision was to hire Ed Morgan, an experienced school administrator who had been a middle school principal in Utah. As the newcomer on campus, he approached his new task methodically, by listening and observing to determine how his personality would fit with the school staff. As a first step, he brought all teachers and support staff together for a retreat for several days in August before the new school year started. Teachers identified this retreat as a critical incident in the middle school's change process. The retreat was a unique professional development event in the sense that the traditional books were left behind. The entire staff gathered for an intense time of reflection, planning, and brainstorming that laid the groundwork for shared decision making and a new identity for the middle school.

Back on campus, the principal constantly encouraged teachers to work together, both formally and informally. For example, he suggested that they have lunch together regularly in the teachers' lunchroom, rather than remain alone in their classrooms as they had done in the past. Teachers describe the "lunchroom phenomenon" as an opportunity for them to break down barriers and start talking with one another.

Implementing Long Term Change

With this new environment, teachers felt that they could come forward with their ideas. They constantly worked together to make a middle school that worked. They set systems in place to support failing students, to emphasize academics, to improve their expertise, and to align the curriculum.

Creating a Safety Net

Because teachers were so concerned about the high rates of failure, and the fact that some students were being socially promoted, they decided to implement a no-failure policy in academic subjects. So that students would be able to get the academic support that they needed to succeed, school staff shifted resources. Teachers developed the idea of the Discovery Room, a room that was open every period and staffed with an experienced teacher. Teacher aides were assigned to work in the Discovery Room, where they were available to help students throughout the day. Teachers encouraged students to go to the Discovery Room, especially during electives, for extra help. The concept proved to be successful.

Focusing on Academics

The old middle school struggled with maintaining its academic focus. Most students were performing at least one grade level below their grade level. Teachers and the new principal were all instrumental in getting the school back on an academic course. After the teachers agreed that they would no longer tolerate the unchallenging, shallow classes and constant interruptions during their class time, the principal implemented several changes. First, electives were limited to one class per day which was the only class that could be interrupted. Second, electives became more academically oriented. Teachers continued to offer fun activities, but the activities had to tie to academics. For example, they started "Math Discovery" to emphasize problem solving skills. An eighth-grade student confirmed that this discovery approach was helpful because he was able to do things, rather than just hear about things.

Teachers began to push their students in mathematics. They raised the mathematics level by one grade and worked on ways to get the students up to grade level. For example, they added another mathematics practice into the students' morning schedule to reinforce their newly acquired

skills through constant exercise. Teachers also implemented other interventions to raise academic focus, such as the Steps Essay and use of the theory of multiple intelligences.

Investing in Teachers

Teachers felt that much of their prior inservice training had not been productive. Although the district had paid a significant amount for professional development services, teachers considered a lot of the training to be a waste of time. For example, when outside people were brought in, they gave a "little dog-and-pony show for a day and then [left] with no ongoing support available" (Principal). Much of the training teachers received was not applicable to their specific classroom need. In general, teachers were frustrated by the hodgepodge approach to staff development. One teacher characterized the situation in very direct terms: "People get downright cranky about sitting through two-and-a-half hours of what they consider B S. because we're never going to use it in our classroom" (Teacher-c).

To make professional development more effective, the school (and the district) decided to use the teacher leader approach. Two extraordinary teachers were identified who were willing to play two roles simultaneously. While still remaining in the classroom, the two teachers assumed responsibility for capacity building in the district in their particular area of expertise. The teacher leaders benefited from the constant feedback they received in their classrooms and the opportunity to be exposed to ongoing professional development opportunities. They worked closely together with their colleagues and with district administrators to identify training needs. The teacher leaders synthesized the training materials to make the information useful for Tonasket Middle School teachers. One of the trainers explains how he attended a two-day session on analyzing test scores and ended up developing an hour-and-a-half presentation for the staff. While the teacher leaders provide a lot of staff development for the middle school teachers, they also encourage teachers to attend one or two outside professional development events per year, such as the Northwest Math Conference.

Supporting State Standards

The changes that started in Washington's education system in 1993 helped the middle school emphasize academics. Every teacher received a technical manual that described the essential academic learning requirements for each subject area.

When he became the middle school principal, he assumed a leading role in the district, serving as the head of the districtwide curriculum alignment team, which also included middle school teachers. Later, an assessment team was formed to work on the new legislation. The principal was eager to bring his school staff on board with the legislative changes, so he arranged to pay stipends to those teachers who attended early morning meetings for sixteen weeks to align the curriculum with the state standards. The teachers prepared lessons with the components that addressed the prescribed standards. During these early morning meetings, teachers administered sample tests to each other and then dissected each question. By actually taking the tests, the teachers were better able to understand the students' perspectives. In the next phase, the teachers shared lesson plans with each other so that they could come to an agreement on what should be taught.

Legislative changes led to an increased focus on assessments. In response, teachers attempted to make the assessments as productive and meaningful as possible. One teacher describes how she talks with students about the role of assessment and how it relates to different thinking skills. She emphasizes that students constantly assess themselves and each other. Teachers began to view tests as formative tools, and the assessments were seen as opportunities for both teachers and students to learn. Students were comfortable taking the tests in this context. They felt that the teachers did not blame them because of poor results. The principal and the counselor gave pep talks

and answered questions in each seventh-grade classroom before the comprehensive seventh-grade WASL tests were administered. Students appreciated the fact that, after the tests were given, teachers reviewed topics that the students had not understood.

Before scores are sent home, the counselor meets with each student to discuss what the scores mean. This year, she plans to obtain the last year's WASL scores before the test is administered. She plans to analyze the tests step-by-step to identify weaknesses so that students can focus on those areas specifically before the test.

Overcoming Obstacles

Because the teachers and administrators have an overwhelming sense of pride about what they have accomplished for their school, they have been able to cope with the difficulties that the district has experienced as a result of the region's overall economic decline. The district had to eliminate several teaching positions and reduce funding for some programs because of a decrease in the student population. Because of budget constraints, the Discovery Room program was reduced to one class period only. Some teachers compensated for this loss of intervention opportunity by staying longer after school to help students. Although test scores declined in 2001, the climate of the school has not suffered because teachers know that they still have the support of administrators and that the situation will be turned around in time.

Moving Forward

To illustrate how dramatically the community's perception of the school has changed, Mr. Hauff shared a conversation that he had with a hospital administrator several years ago. When he first came to Tonasket, a hospital administrator told the superintendent that he never brought doctors to the school campus when he was trying to recruit them for the local hospital because there was "no way that they would want to put their kids here." The superintendent was deeply hurt to find that this was indeed the prevailing attitude among professionals in the community. It was particularly painful for him to face the fact that he would be sending his own children into that failing school system. But that was not the end of the story.

Today the schools are among the first places that the hospital administrator brings his prospective employees "because of what is here." People are actually moving to Tonasket today because of the school system's reputation. Although they are very proud of their accomplishments to date, Tonasket's administrators and teachers are aware that they must continue to strive for improvement to ensure continued success. They are currently developing plans and attempting to secure resources to implement a gifted and talented program, as well as an organized mentoring program.

Conclusion

The teachers, support staff, administrators, students, parents, district personnel, and representatives from outside agencies who shared their stories for this study were able to eloquently and enthusiastically describe why their particular schools were successful and how these schools were able to improve. Equally as impressive was what they did not say—virtually none of the participants in this study made excuses for not holding all students to high expectations. They did not complain about a lack of time or resources. They did not disparage their administration or district. They did not protest against state standards and accountability systems. They did not place blame on their colleagues. Most notably, they did not use the students' and their families' home and community situations as an excuse for poor student academic performance.

All seven of these schools showed impressive student performance improvement in a relatively short period of time. Most moved from below average on state (and in some cases, national) assessments to above average. These schools accomplished this inspiring achievement through a belief that each and every student could achieve at high levels and that each student deserved to achieve at high levels. The staff in these schools took responsibility for student learning and found ways to provide staff and students with the support they needed to reach their goals. This responsibility required a commitment to hard work and a no-excuses attitude toward identifying and solving problems. By working together, individuals helped turn these schools around.

The seven schools in this study do not purport to have achieved their goals. Rather, the staff at these schools insist they have much more work to do. Some still wrestle with helping all students meet the state standards. Some schools struggle to provide more students with advanced-level courses that emphasize critical thinking and applied knowledge. Others see balancing between students' academic and developmental needs as a challenge. The staff at these schools are in the habit of looking ahead to identify problems. They are also in the habit of taking the responsibility to identify solutions to these problems and feel it is their duty to follow through with collective action.

Those who work in similar settings understand what these schools have accomplished. Not only are these schools performing better than schools with similar demographics, but they are performing as well as and often better than more affluent schools. However, it would be a mistake to assume that these schools are inimitable—that what they have accomplished cannot be accomplished elsewhere. These schools are like hundreds across the country. They serve a high proportion of students living in poverty; they have a range of teaching and leadership expertise; and they have a range of access to resources. Their successes stem from the commonality of purpose and their willingness to work hard together to achieve their goals. They provide valuable lessons for other school communities taking on the difficult challenge of setting high expectations for all students. These seven middle schools have proved that it can be done because they were driven to succeed.

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